AGNOSTICISM

The World Book Encyclopedia states about the origin of the term 'agnosticism': “The term comes from the Greek word ‘agnostos’ which means not knowing. It was first coined by the British nationalist Thomas Henry Huxley in 1869” (159-60). Agnosticism connotes the doctrine that man does not know and cannot know whether anything exists behind and beyond material phenomena and in particular we can know nothing about the first cause of an unseen world. In other words, the doctrine asserts that we can have a certain knowledge of the material objects only; as regards the knowledge of such objects as are the primary concern of metaphysics and theology, namely God, the human soul and its immortality; agnosticism claims, these are unknown and unknowable. To the question whether there exists any Living, Conscious Power, behind the myriad manifestation of natural phenomena, the agnostic answers: “We cannot tell; and even if there is, we cannot know it, nor have any knowledge of its nature or working” (Armstrong 15). Agnosticism does not deny the belief in ultimate reality and other ontological existences. It merely states that the knowledge of the noumenal entities of which the thing of common sense are knowable shadow, cannot be known.

Agnosticism accepts the primacy of experience and does not accept whatever cannot be rationally verified. Regarding this The Nuttall Encyclopaedia mentions: “Agnosticism, the doctrine which disclaims all knowledge of the super sensuous, or denies that we know or can know the absolute, the infinite, or God” (8). It sets limits to human intelligence by showing the relative nature of our knowledge. Human knowledge fails to grasp the Absolute, the Unconditioned because it is based on sense
experience and is condition by the objects of sense perception. From the epistemological point of view, agnosticism, as Herond Titus puts it, may be defined as “The view that knowledge is limited or impossible and that therefore knowledge of God is impossible” (412). Agnosticism neither affirms nor denies God's existence; it merely suspend judgement regarding the existence of God and other such metaphysical entities. Dr Radhakrishanana defines agnosticism by saying that, “it admits the mystery and holds that we do not know and cannot know” (60).

Agnosticism is a doctrine that completely or partially denies the possibility of knowing the universe. Dictionary of Philosophy states: “Lenin laid bare the epistemological roots of Agnosticism and said that agnostic separates substance from its appearance, that he does not go farther than sensation. The attitude of compromise adopted by Agnosticism leads its supporters to idealism” (12). Practice or experience, scientific experimentation, and material production are the best refutation of Agnosticism. If people cognise certain phenomena and then deliberately, reproduce them, no place is left for the ‘unknowable thing-in-itself’. However, cognition is a complex process that may warrant doubt. Absolutisation of this bring some modern scholars to agnosticism.

Man has never been able to offer an adequate and rational explanation of the mystery that pervades the universe. Mystery has remained a mystery, and has defied all intellectual explanation. Sir Leslie Spetphen, in his celebrated work *An Agnostic's Apology*, defines an agnostic as, “One who asserts—what no one denies—that there are limits to the sphere of human intelligence”(2) Therefore, an intellectual for whom the only source of knowledge is sense perception, is bound to remain an agnostic, for the thing-in-itself can not be rationally know. Commenting on the position of an agnostic, Sir Leslie Stephen says:
One insoluble doubt has haunted man's minds since thought began in the world. No answer has even been suggested. One school of philosophers herds it to the next. It is denied in one form only to reappear in another. The question is not which excludes the doubt, but how it expresses the doubt. Admit or deny the competence of reason in theory, we all agree that—it fails in practice. Theologians revile reason as much as Agnostics; they then appeal to it, and it decides against them. They amend their plea by excluding certain questions from its jurisdiction, and these questions include the whole difficulty. They go to revelation, and revelation replies by calling doubt, mystery. They declare that their consciousness declares just what they want to do declare. Ours declares something else. Who is to decide? They only appeal is to experience, and to appeal to experience is to admit the fundamental dogma of Agnosticism. (11)

The agnostic feels that, “the ancient secret is a secret still; that man knows nothing of the Infinite and absolute.” (Stephen 20) Therefore, it is better to admit ignorance regarding these than to profess any dogmatic belief. Whatever cannot be scientifically known, must be kept in abeyance. T.H. Huxley in his essay ‘Agnosticism and Christianity’, asserts that agnosticism:

... express absolute faith in the validity of a principle, which is as much ethical as intellectual. This principle may be stated in various ways, but they all amount to this: that it is wrong for a man to say that he is certain of the objective truth of any proposition unless he can produce evidence which logically justifies that certainly. This is what
Agnosticism asserts; and in my opinion, it is all that is essential to Agnosticism. That which Agnostics deny and repudiate, as immoral, is the contrary doctrine, that there are proposition which men ought to believe, without logically satisfactory evidence; and that reprobation ought to attach to be profession of disbelief in such inadequately supported propositions... the application of that principle results in the denial of, or the suspension of judgement concerning a number of proposition respecting which our contemporary ecclesiastical ‘gnostics’ profess entire certainty.” (310-11)

It was to repudiate the charges of ‘infidelity’ levelled against Huxley by the ecclesiastical dogmatists that he coined the term ‘agnosticism’ to show his own attitude towards the metaphysical entities, but the attitude has been professed before. It emerged in the form of scepticism in the Greek Philosophy under the tutelage of Pyrrho whose advocated taking the form of agnosticism and suspension of judgement. He denied that anything was honorable or dishonorable, just or unjust. And so universally Pyrrho held that there is nothing really existent, but custom and convention govern human actions, for no single thing is in itself any more this then that. This was further provided elaborated treatment by Hume and Kant in their theory of knowledge. The term which seems to have been suggested to Huxley by an inscription ‘To the Unknown God’ which St. Paul saw on an altar in the Athens as recorded in Act XVII.23, however, gained currency due to Huxley’s consistent use to show his own philosophical position during his intellectual debate with the Christian apologists. As opposed to the gnostics, an intensely mystical doctrine of the early Christian Church, which claims special revelation of the nature of the spiritual reality, Huxley asserted that he was an agnostic, for man’s cognitive faculties can never grasp the
When I reached intellectual maturity and began to ask myself whether I was an atheist, a theist, or a pantheist; a materialist, or an idealist; a Christian or a free thinker; I found that the more I learned and reflected, the less ready was the answer; until, at least, I came to the conclusion that I had neither art nor part with any of these denominations, except the last. The one thing in which most of these good people were agreed was the one thing in which I differed from them. They were quite sure they had attained a certain 'gnosis', --had, more or less successfully, solved the problem of existence; while I was quite sure I had not and had a pretty strong conviction that the problem was insolvable. And with Hume and Kant on my side, I could not think myself presumptuous in holding fast by that opinion... This was my situation when I had the good fortune to find a place among the members of that remarkable confraternity of antagonists... The Metaphysical Society. Every variety of philosophical and Theological opinion was represented there and expressed itself with entire openness; most of my colleagues were -ists of one sort or another; and however kind and friendly they might be, I, the man without rag of a label to cover myself with, could not fail to have some of the uneasy feelings....so I took thought, and invented what I conceived to be the appropriate title of 'agnosticism'. (237-39)

Thus, Professor Huxley's agnosticism was the result of the bitter controversy that took place between the orthodox Christian believers who
stained the utmost to defend their religion which was sadly contradicted by the new findings of science, and the zealous advocates of science who adhered to the scientific methods of inquiry, and rejected miracles in the Bible on the ground that they lacked evidence. Dr. Kulwant Singh Gill opines in this context: “Since the strong and deep tide of faith has receded, the poet is left with nothing but agnostic doubt and despair.” (24) Unable to accept testimony as a source of knowledge as Dr. Wace, Gladstone and others did, Huxley could not accept the demonology of the primitive Christianity, and rejected many of their miracles on the ground that these supernatural occurrences could not be scientifically proved. The only thing that counted for him as a scientific thinker, was evidence, and since the demonic spiritual world lacks evidence, Huxley felt it was his intellectual duty to suspend judgement, and seek shelter in agnosticism which is nothing but the resolution to suspend judgement on all questions about which empirical inquiry does not provide sufficient evidence to prove their validity. Huxley’s agnosticism is, thus, not a denial but an indication of doubt in those matters for which no evidence can be warranted and which go against the findings of the great school master experience. Similarly, in another essay, Huxley says that since one of the unpardonable sins for a man was to go about unlabelled, he had to find a label for himself. Huxley, of course, “readily concedes that there may be some place, ‘other side of no where’, par example, where 2+2=5, and all bodies naturally repel one another instead of gravitating together” (Leonard Huxley 249), provided you can bring any scientific evidence to support your contention.

Although Huxley always asserted the impossibility of answering the ultimate questions of existence, his theoretical agnosticism, however, does not hide a practical conviction that ideas express material realities. He regarded everything known as evolved from matter, and reduced
consciousness to a mere epiphenomenon of matter. Huxley was never in any real doubt about the primacy of the material universe, and though his thought is here and there predominated by the idealistic tendencies, the ultimate conclusion in his belief in materialism. James Ward in his book *Naturalism and Agnosticism*, while attaching Huxley, the scientific Champion of agnosticism, comments: “Spite of his vehement repudiation of the title of materialist as an affront to his untarnished agnosticism, I know of few recent writers who on occasion better deserve the title.”

(212) It seems that it is as a refuge from dread of materialism that Huxley offers us agnosticism. Though agnosticism as Lenin observes, “Serves as a fig leaf for materialism” (212), the fact remains, as Huxley’s last unfinished article ‘Mr. Belfoure’s Attack on Agnosticism’ shows that he retained to the end his agnostic attitude towards the noumenal existents.

Hume, favorably referred to by T.H. Huxley as the “prince of agnostics” (249) is an epistemological agnostic for his agnosticism is the natural outcome of his empirical view of knowledge which brought a revolution in philosophy. Hume reduces all contents of consciousness to perception which are further divided into ‘impressions’ and ‘ideas’. Where as the former include our sensations and emotions, the latter are the faint copies of them. In the process of thinking we connect ‘impressions’ and ‘ideas’ with such conceptions as causality, substance, and subject. Hume contends that we cannot derive such conceptions from mere sensations which are the only and inclusive source of our knowledge. Such conceptions are derived from custom; since we are accustomed to see that one thing follows another in time, we conceive that it must follow and from it, and thus of a relation of succession we make a relation of causality. We have no right to affirm that any such connection necessarily exists. Events follow one another and we can never observe a tie between them. They seem conjoined but never connected. Similarly.
about substance, Home says that the idea of a substance as well as that of mode is nothing but a collection of simple ideas which are united by imagination and have particular name assigned to them by which we are able to recall either to ourselves or others that collection. Mind, too, is nothing but a heap or collection of different perceptions united together by certain relations and supposed through falsely to be endowed with perfect simplicity and identity. Thus, the Human epistemology posits that any general view of the ultimate nature of things is not possible, and human knowledge can never reach absolute certainty. We do not know whether there are things-in-themselves or not. All that we can do is to limit ourselves to the world of experience. About Hume’s agnosticism a critic named, Frank Thilly calls it empiricism because our knowledge has its source in experience, and we know nothing of ultimate substances, causes, souls, ego, external world or universe.

Hume held no belief in miracles, and denied them in his Essay on Miracles. He throws discredit on the theistic arguments in Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, which are too inadequate to establish the existence of God. Hume, however, recognised that the belief in God was necessary in practical life, and recognised the stronger power of natural instinct as leading sanction to common beliefs, for which no rational proof could be given. Apart from this belief in the existence of God, which is necessary for our ethical, could not to Hume: “The whole is a riddle, an engima, an inexplicable mystery. Doubt, uncertainty, suspense of judgement appear the only result of our most accurate scrutiny, concerning this subject” (76). This conclusion is certainly agnostic.

Kant’s agnosticism is the result of his imposing epistemological system which he laboriously built to effect a compromise between the old dogmatism and the English empiricism, and to investigate the possibility
or impossibility of universal knowledge. Hume’s Treatise had been a clear indication that empiricism taken to its extremes, would lead to a kind of radical scepticism which few human beings could have the courage to accept. Its sensation is the only source of knowledge, surely then we can have no knowledge of God and soul. Kant took it upon himself to answer Hume’s agnosticism, but failed, for his epistemology would not allow him to have an access to the transempirical reality what Kant called the thing-in-itself.

From Hume, Kant however learnt that reason alone is not competent to give us a knowledge of the objective reality, and that while perceptions merely form the raw material of cognition. Kant agrees with the rationalists that the philosophical knowledge must take the form of a priori judgement which can never be arrived at by means of empirical generalisation from the sensuous experience. He also agrees with the empiricists that experience is the exclusive source of knowledge. The sense impressions, which form the raw material of knowledge, are modified and systematised by the human mind. Knowledge, according to Kant, is a joint product of the form what he calls ‘categories’. Provided by the mind, and matter provided by the objects. The only reality of which we can acquire knowledge is that which is capable of being reduced through experience.

Thus, Kantian view of knowledge sets limits to human knowledge. Knowledge cannot transcend experience, and therefore, we can have no knowledge of things—in-themselves, but only of things as they effect our consciousness. A knowledge of things-in-themselves through sheer reason and extending beyond experience is a non-entity, a chimera. We cannot have a meta-physics that can offer us genuine knowledge of non-phenomenal world, free will immutability and God. Things-in-themselves, however, exist because without them sensation is unexplainable. Kant, in
fact, never doubted the existence of the thing-in-itself, because his early pietistic education had left an indelible impression on his mind regarding its existence. Like Hume, Kant too separates knowledge from faith and restricts knowledge only to the world of sense perception. The progress of knowledge will never discover more than phenomena, the thing-in-itself can never be rationally known, and speculative reason must forever remain agnostic.

The existence of God for Kant becomes a matter of Faith which he substitutes for knowledge. The allegations that Kant fell into metaphysics after he had so ably demonstrated its vanity is not justified, for Kant never claims that any rational metaphysics is possible. The metaphysics to which Kant opposed himself is that which undertakes to appear as a science. To that metaphysics he never consented. What he admitted was a strictly agnostic faith, an other thing altogether which critique in no way forbade him.

Comte’s positivism is essentially agnostic for it asserts that positive knowledge has an empirical basis and arises out of the observation of observed facts. Positivism does not attempt to seek the absolute causes but only the laws of phenomena. Moreover, knowledge is not absolute, but relative. We do not know the essence nor the real mode of production of any fact, but only its relations to other facts in the way of succession or similitude. Comte, like Kant, accepts that knowledge cannot transcend experience, but where as Kant emphatically asserted his belief in the noumenon, Comte does not do so. But neither does Comte question this, on the contrary all his language implies it, and this certainly places him in the category of the agnostics.

The most significant source of the agnostic movement in the nineteenth century was William Hamilton’s On the Philosophy of the
Conditioned, which he wrote to refute Coussin’s assertion that we can have a knowledge of God. Hamilton’s contention is that only the conditioned and limited can be the object of knowledge. He says our whole knowledge of mind is relative, conditioned—relatively conditioned. Of things absolute, or in themselves, be they external, be they internal, we know nothing, or know them only as incognisable. Therefore, all we know, is phenomenal of the unknown. Knowledge is relative because we determine everything we are able to comprehend by its relation to something else by which it is conditioned and limited, and also because of the subject-object relationship. If knowledge is relative, we cannot know the ultimate being for the Ultimate is unconditioned. While the Divine nature cannot be known, Divine existence may be believed because our moral natures demand it, and scriptures testify it.

Mansel employed Hamiltonian views on the relatively of knowledge to drew religious conclusions which lay conceded in Hamilton’s “agnostic phenomenalism.” (Metz 38) As a Christian apologist, Mansel in his The Limits of Religious Thought defends theology on the ground that the contradictions which appear in theology would appear in any attempt at world conception ever if it were based on Nature or Reason, because the difficulties arise from the limits of reason. He further says we may reasonably conclude that the stumbling blocks which the rationalist, professes to find in the doctrines of revealed religion arise, not from defects peculiar to revelation, but from the laws and limits of human thought in general and are thus inherent in the methods of rationalism itself, not in objects which it pretend to criticise. By showing the inability of reason to reach the transcendental realities, Mansal asks us to rely on faith. He says we ought to believe in the existence of God whose nature we are unable to comprehend. As God is our Sustainer, and our Moral Governor, Mansal remains a religious agnostic. While he accepts the
limitations of reason, at the same time he believes in revelation, that what cannot be rationally known, can be intuitively comprehended.

Herbert Spencer, “the foremost representative of agnosticism” (Stephen 8), enunciates the agnostic principles in his First Principles. His agnosticism rests on the familiar epistemological arguments about the limitations of our cognitive capacities. Calling attention to the relativity of knowledge, Spenser opines that thinking being relationing, can express no more than relations and intellect is framed simply by and for converse with phenomenon. It involves us in nonsense when we try to use it for anything beyond phenomena. Human knowledge is limited to the relative and the phenomenal, but these imply by their very names and natures something beyond them, something ultimate, an Absolute, which Spencer names Unknowable. Spencer says on watching our thoughts we see how impossible it is to get rid of the consciousness of an Actuality lying behind appearances, and how from this impossibility results our indestructible belief in that Actuality. But what that Actuality is, we can never know.

Though in the twentieth century, the term ‘agnosticism’ has lost much of the popularity it enjoyed during the latter half of the nineteenth century, some philosophical movements do indicate an agnostic tendency in their systems. Pragmatism and Logical Positivism are agnostic to the extent that their epistemology forbids any knowledge of the absolute. As Hocking observes: “Pragmatism accepts the agnostic’s judgement of the incompetence of ‘pure reason’ in metaphysics: the most important of our question about the universe cannot be answered by way of proof or disproof; and there are no fixed axioms or a priori truths to serve as a firm base of certainty.” (Hocking 141) The pragmatist however, does not agree with the agnostic that the mere suspense of judgement is sufficient
concerning the vital matters of belief. If the intellect is inadequate to solve the mystery of existence, there must be an appeal to the will to achieve conclusions or matter of belief.

William James, the chief representative of pragmatism, bases his theory of knowledge on the sense experience. But he differs from the British empiricists in his theory of stream of consciousness which brings to an end of the old distinction between mind and matter, subject and object. There is only one primal stuff out of which everything is made this stuff he calls, "pure experience". This experience according to James needs no substratum. Transcendental unites of apperception, ego, souls, spiritual substances are all unnecessary because relatives are not introduced from outside, but are part and parcel of sense experience. This epistemological position does not admit us to look outside experience for metaphysical entities. Pragmatism thus does not talk of first principles, but deals with things and life. The religious hypothesis is essentially unverifiable hypothesis, and cannot be logically demonstrated. We must in the practical sense believe where we cannot in the theoretical sense know. What else is this, if not agnosticism.

The Logical Positivists agree with the early empiricist philosophers that the solve source of knowledge is sense perception, and that knowledge is sense perception, and that knowledge can be verified only in experience. They do not accept priori truths representing the eternal and necessary character of being itself. Our propositions and so called truths are merely conventions which are either verified or not by sensible reality which alone is the abiding factor. The propositions concerning God, the soul, the First Cause etc. are meaningless statements because they cannot be referred to any observable phenomena. Such statements are neither true nor false, but just meaningless and non-sensible. Logical positivism thus
differs from the traditional positivism of the agnostic variety in the sense that, for the agnostic, the metaphysical statement that 'there is a God' is a genuine proposition, the truth value of which cannot be determined, whereas for a logical positivist the statement is meaningless. A logical positivist is an agnostic to the extent that he frankly confesses that the human intellect is unable to find conclusive answer to many questions of profound importance to mankind. Further, he refuses to believe there is some higher way of knowing by which we can discover truths hidden from science and intellect. It is on this ground that Bertrand Russell, the most leading exponent of the philosophy of logical analysis, called himself an agnostic. In his radio debate over the B.B.C with the Jesuit philosopher, F.C. Copelston, Russell frankly admitted he was an agnostic:

Copelston: Well my position is the affirmative position that such a being exists, and that his existence can be proved philosophically. Perhaps, you would tell me if your position is that of agnosticism of atheism. I mean, would you say that the non-existence of God can be proved?
Russell : No, I should not say that: my position is agnostic. (144)

God and immortality are mere hypotheses and they lie outside the region of ever probable knowledge. Therefore, agnosticism is the only sensible attitude.

Diverse views have been expressed with regard to Buddha's silence on metaphysical questions concerning a future life, the origin and nature of the universe. Whatever Buddha's views may have been, he declined to engage in discussions on these questions on the ground that they were not helpful to the seeker of salvation. Since we do not have an authentic account of Buddha's teachings, for he wrote no books, and his teachings
which he orally handed to his disciples, were compiled long after his
death there is a certain amount of vagueness in them. Dr. S.
Raddhakrishnan in his book Indian Philosophy suggests that it is difficult
to say with certainty how much of the canonical Buddhism is due to
Buddha himself, and how much is latter development. In the canonical
literature, there are, however, passages which suggest that perhaps
Buddha had agnostic leanings, and these passages are often quoted by
Western scholars who interpret Buddha’s silence as a kind of agnosticism.

In the Brahmjallasutta, Buddha rejects a series of propositions
concerning the nature of the universe, and of the human soul, on the
ground that such theories merely feed the idle curiosity and do not tend to
edification. Buddha shows overseen to speculative thinking for it does not
help in the cessation of pain, and liberation from the ‘samsara’. Such
speculative concepts form the net in which the ignorant are caught
including the Brahma who, according to the Hindu mythology, is said to
have created the world. These metaphysical questions again appear in
Majjhima-Nikaya, when Malunkyaputta very energetically asks the
Buddha to answer the puzzles of the world. Thinks Malunkyaputta:

These theories which the Blessed one has left un elucidated, has set aside and rejected,—that the world is
eternal, that the world is not eternal, that the world is finite,
that the world is infinite, that the soul and the body are
identical, that the soul is one thing and the body another, that
the saint exists after death, that the saint does not exist after
death, that the saint both exist and does not exist after death,
that the saint neither exist nor does not exist after death,—
these the Blessed One does not elucidate to me. (Warren 117)
The Buddha likens the metaphysician to that foolish man wounded by an arrow who, before being attended to, would like to know what sort of arrow struck him, whence it came etc. The wounded man would have died before he got a satisfactory answer. Hairsplitting metaphysical subtleties will lead the seeker of salvation no where. The Buddha tells Malunkyaputta:

The religious life, Malunkyaputta, does not depend on the dogma that the world is eternal; nor does the religious life. Malunkyaputta depend on the dogma that the world is not eternal. Whether the dogma obtain, Malunkyaputta, that the world is eternal, or that the world is not eternal, there still remain births, old age, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief, and despair, for the extinction of which in the present life I am prescribing. (Warren 121)

To the wandering ascetic, Vacchagota's questions whether the world is eternal, or not; whether the saint exists after death or not, the Buddha's answer is that these doctrines will never help to lessen the pain, and lead to Nirvanic bliss. Thus spake the Blessed One:

Vaccha, the theory that the world is eternal, is a jungle, a wilderness, a puppet-show, a writhing, and a fetter, and is coupled with misery, ruin despair, and agony, and does not tend to aversion, absence of passion, cessation, quiescence, knowledge, supreme wisdom, Nirvana. (Warren 123)

Similarly, Buddha refuses to answer the questions because they will never release the suffering being from the bondage of his empirical existence which has nothing but pain. The Buddha says that he has no theories
The Tathagata, O Vaccha, is free from all theories; but this, Vaccha, does the Tathagata know,—the nature of form, and how form arises, and how form perishes; the nature of sensation, and how sensation arises, and how sensation perishes; the nature of perception, and how perception arises, and how perception perishes; the nature of the predisposition, and how predispositions arise, and how the predispositions perish; the nature of consciousness, and how consciousness arises, and how consciousness perishes. (Warren 125)

When the Buddha tells Vaccha that his doctrine is profound, difficult of comprehension, and "not to be reached by reasoning" (Warren 126), he certainly emphasises the inability of reason to probe deeper into the nature of reality, and thus sets limits to the investigation of reality. In The Questions of King Milinda, when the king tells Nagasena, the Buddhist says, that the Buddha made no reply to the questions of Malunkyputta, either out of ignorance or out of wish to conceal something. Nagasena replies:

... that was neither out of ignorance, nor for the sake of concealing anything. There are four kinds of ways in which a problem may be explained..... There is the problem to which an explanation can be given that shall be direct and final. There is the problem which can be given answer by going into details. There is the problem which can be answered by asking another. And there is the problem which can be put on one side.
And which, O King, is the problem to which a direct and final solution can be given? It is such as this—'Is form impermanent?' 'Is sensation impermanent?' 'Is idea impermanent?' 'Is consciousness impermanent?' And which is the problem which can be answered by going into details? It is such as this—'Is form thus impermanent?, and so on.

And which is the problem which can be answered by asking another? It is such as this—'What then? Can the eye perceive all things?'

And which is the problem which can be put on one side? It is such as this—'Is the universe everlasting?' 'Is it not everlasting?' 'Has it an end?' 'Has it no end?' 'Is it both endless and unending?' 'Is it neither the one nor the other?' 'Are the soul and the body the same thing?' 'Does it a Tathagata exist after death?' 'Does he not exist after death?' 'Does he both exist and not exist after death?' 'Does he neither exist nor not exist after death?'

Now it was to such a question, one that ought to be put on one side, that the Blessed One gave no reply to Malaunkyaputta. And why such a question to be put on one side? Because there is no reason or object for answering it. That is why it should be put aside. For the Blessed Buddhas lift not up their voice without a reason and without an object.

(Davids 205-06)

It becomes quite evident that Buddha’s reveal to answer these questions is certainly on epistemological grounds for such questions do not come in the preview of reason, and are, therefore inexplicable. It is a frank admission that the empirical understanding can never fathom the
ultimate truth. T.R.V. Murti in his *The central Philosophy of Buddhism* makes an apt observation in this connection when he opines that Buddha was aware of the antinoumeal character of reason. Further, he says Buddha’s refusal to answer questions about the beginning and extent of the world or of unconditioned existence of the soul (Jiva) and the Tathagata, the Perfect Being was the direct outcome of the awareness of the conflict in Reason. Though the Buddhist theory is based on sensationalism, for Buddha did not “recognise anything beyond perception and reason”. (Hiriyanaya) It does not recognise any substance and expressly derives the existence of any eternal, permanent entity called God. We cannot call the Buddha an agnostic for he had a direct, intuitive insight into reality, and the experience of Nirvana convinced him of the futility of all kind of logical reasoning.

The Buddhist doctrine of impermanence reduces the world process to be coming Everything is in a state of flux. What we call the “Self” is nothing but an aggregate of the five ‘Sakandhas’. Buddhism, thus makes a radical departure from the ‘atimavada’ doctrine of the ‘Upanisads’. The second sermon that the Buddha delivered at Benars was on the non-existence of the soul. In the *Milinda Pavha*, Nagasena makes the king understand the doctrine of no self by giving the example of a chariot. Just as a chariot is neither, the pole, nor the wheels, nor the axle, and that the ‘chariot’ is a symbol for all those parts assembled together, so is the word ‘self’ a mere label call for the aggregate of certain physical and psychical factors called the ‘Sakandha’

We cannot bear with Prof. Keith who claims that, “agnosticism in these matters is not based on any reasoned conviction of the limits of knowledge” (45), and that Buddha had “no reasoned or other conviction on the matter” (63). To that Buddha had no definite philosophy of life is
to falsify entire Buddhism. It cannot be that the Buddha voyaged through life without a chart, for then his system would be unintelligible and his passion for humanity inexplicable. Buddha, of course shunned metaphysical subtleties and evaded questions on first and final causes, for his was an age when metaphysical theories grew with tropical exuberance, and for a seeker of salvation, it was essential to steer clear of them.

The Buddha nowhere in the text says that he does not know. He merely evades the questions on metaphysical issues because they cannot help end pain. R.J. Thomas rightly observes:

To this extent Buddhism may be said to be agnostic, not in teaching the fundamental unknowability of the nature of things as in Spencerian agnosticism, but in excluding from investigation definite problems which were useless to the practical aim of the seeker after freedom from pain. To human reason they were problems still. (202)

The Buddha’s experience of Nirvana made him realise that the absolute could not be described for that would be taken out of the world of relativity. The absolute is not a matter of empirical observation, and experience does not reveal it anywhere within its limits. Of course, the discursive reasoning has its own place, and the Buddha in the ‘Suttas’ reasons and instructs by analogy and inductive argument, but the saving insight comes not through this reasoning. The Buddha attains enlightenment “in a complete intuition the fruit of a long process in which he has overcome all form and empiric knowledge”. (Keith 39) Buddha’s silence, therefore, cannot be construed as agnosticism, for agnosticism is the attitude of doubt and despair, where as Nirvana brings to an end all kind of theoretic curiosity, and therefore, the suspense of judgement, uncertainty have non place after the experience. Nirvana is the summon
bonum of Buddhism, and the ultimate goal to be reached by a novice. It is not a negative stage, as it has been defined by Kant and others. It certainly corresponds to the mystical experience as recorded in other religions. Ananda Coomarswamy rightly observes: “What are Moksha to the Brahman, the Tao to the Chinese mystic, Fana to the Sufi, Eternal Life to the followers of Jesus, that is Nirvana to the Buddhist.” (106)

Moreover, if we look closely at the various descriptions given to the ineffable experience of Nirvana, we find that these descriptions in no way differ from those of the ‘moksa’ of the Hindus and the salvation of Christianity. The state of Nirvana is described with a wealth of epithets by Phys David in his book Early Buddhism—the harbor of refuse, the cool cane, the island amidst the floods, the place of bliss, emancipation, liberation, safety, the tranquil, the house of peace, the calm and end of suffering, the medicine for all of it, the medicine for all of tit, the unshaken, the ambrosia, the immaterial, the imperishable, the abiding, the further shore, the unending, the bliss of effort, the supreme joy, the ineffable, the detachment, and the holy city. These descriptions differ in no way from the mystical experience of other sages. If Nirvana is the ultimate goal of Buddhism, then we are left in no doubt, no agnostic uncertainty, for all doubts are set at rest, and peace is attained. If we use the word ‘agnostic’ as a mere adjective to show that one is silent on certain metaphysical issues, or refuses to answer them, we may call the Buddha as an agnostic. But since by agnostic we mean one who remains on the intellectual plane, and does not believe in intuition as a valid source of knowledge, and even if he believes in intuition, and is incapable of intuitive insight, then surely the Buddha is not agnostic. The Buddha remains one of the foremost sages of the orient, for he had an intuitive insight into the nature of reality, and the result was Nirvana, which is certainly another name for the mystical experience. It is another thing that
the Buddha did not express it in theistic or pantheistic terms as was the popular Upanisodic tradition in those days.

Buddhism, like Christianity does not advocate an assent to the unverifiable propositions like the Athanasian Creed or the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Buddha recognizes no personal God or the soul, but concerns itself with the experience of ‘liberation or enlightenment’. Moreover, Buddhaism appeals to Huxley the intellectual, because it is a philosophy based on the principle of operational verification—a test the logical positivists apply to test the validity of an assertion. Huxley says about the Buddha:

Where mysticism was concerned, however, his Operationalism was complete. He would not make assertions about the nature of ultimate reality because it did not seem to him that the corresponding set of mystical operations would admit of a theological interpretation. Mystical operations, he believed, yielded a sufficient answer to such, psychological questions as what is liberation? or what is enlightenment? They did not, in his opinion, yield a sufficient answer to the questions what is Brahman? or what is God? (Aldous Huxley 48)

Tantrik agnosticism is the blend of two cultures—the scientific and the religious, and the Huxley seems to belie Rudyard Kipling’s prophecy that East and West shall never meet. “The synthesis of Eastern religions and Western thought resulted in a kind of agnostic philosophy, when the belief in God and other metaphysical entities is dispensed with, but the faith in the possibility of spiritual experience is retained.” (Gill 32) The Tantrik agnostics do not believe in the theologies which blend the spirit of the real nature of the universe. Theology encourages the conflict
between the human and the divine, the flesh and the spirit and thus has caused endless misery to the human spirit.

Since the Buddha was able to rise above that rationalism which he so rigorously employed to discover the four noble truths about the origin and final cessation of suffering, and the ultimate truth was apprehended by him through intuition, we may make a comparison between agnosticism and mysticism. Mysticism, like agnosticism, also admits that despite our best intellectual effort to know, there remains an element of mystery in reality, and in this respect, "mysticism is more allied to scepticism or agnosticism than to credulity." (Hocking 381) But the mystic attains a direct vision of reality, a vision which he is unable to express, for the super-sensuous cannot be described in a language meant for the understanding of the phenomena. The mystic is silent not because he does not know, but because he cannot explain. Moreover, the mystic neither suspends judgement nor does he maintain a neutral position, on the contrary, he fully asserts the vision that he has attained during the mystical trance. The agnostic does not rise above the intellectual plane, whereas the mystic transcends all limits of the empirical knowledge. Observes Hocking:

The mystic believes, as the agnostic does not, that the quality of the Real, though not describable, can be experienced in a sort of direct knowledge which is far more satisfactory than the remoter knowledge of concepts, just as acquaintance with a person is a more satisfactory knowledge than the best description. (395)

The agnostic position is not tantamount to atheism; for atheism is essentially negative doctrine which emphatically denies the existence of God or the Ultimate Reality as the basis of phenomena. An atheist is a
cross materialist for whom the only reality is matter. Apart from matter, the atheist does not posit any other reality. “The most conspicuous difference between Atheism and Agnosticism”, observes Albert Simmons is that “While the former holds Matter to be Ultimate Cause, the latter holds the Ultimate Cause to be unknowable.” (Simmons 36)

We have the confessions of a few agnostics who, when face to face with some inscrutable dilemma of human existence, during a period of intense emotional crises, were able to get a direct, intuitive glimpse of the ultimate reality, and so overwhelming was the experience that the agnostic doubt was replaced by a kind of mystical certainty. Kenneth Palmer in his Agnostics Anonymous, frankly confesses that he remained an agnostic for thirty years because he was unable to intellectually accept the Apostle’s Creed, the Virgin Birth etc, for the doctrines could never appeal to human reason. The occasion for conversion to a mystical approach to reality was provided by the death of his father, which urged him to know the ultimate meaning of existence. Deep thinking led to a kind of intuition which threw light on those dark areas of the human mind, which reason can never explore. Palmer comes to believe that intuition will give the right answer to every man who will allow it rise above thought. Palmar talking about his spiritual regeneration says:

I’ve come round full circle for I started with Christianity, left it to be an Agnostic, then become an Atheist for a short time, and then, thought always Agnostic, returned by a mixture of Spiritualism, Mysticism and intellectual probing, together with a gradual alignment of ethical conduct through self discipline and some degree of self-denial, to the cleaning personal revelation, which allowed or the focus on the underlying thin gold line of general revelation. (147)
Similarly, Bernard Basset in his book *We Agnostics* gives us an account of a certain agnostic, Herny Dawes, to whom the vision of ultimate reality was vouchsafed during a moment of intuitive insight. It was the realisation of the absurdity of human existence, which threw him off his balance of agnosticism towards a more life affirming altitude, and the agnostic laughter was replaced by the ineffable peace. Says Henry Dawes:

An awareness of life draws from one of the immediate summit with no time for subjective thought. One climbs from the world of living music, living language, living people to a living God. Near to the summit and without any reference to the proofs of him divinity on people, I became aware that Jesus Christ was living and that he was the Incarnate God. (Basset 141)

Agnosticism is not theism for the posits, the existence of personal God who is the Creator of the world, and with whom he can come into intimate relations. Theism, in fact, causes the anthropomorphic concept of the deity, and a theist firmly believes that his appellations and prayers will certainly be answered by this personal God. The agnostic can neither agree with a pantheist who finds the presence of the Divine in all objects of nature, and for whom God becomes identical with nature or the universe.

Agnosticism also differs from scepticism; scepticism doubts the validity of reason everywhere but agnosticism doubts the validity of reason only in the field of metaphysics. It is in a way restricted form of scepticism, for it holds the view that while reason is at home with in 'experience', it cannot do anything beyond experience. While the agnostic says that we cannot know the Ultimate reality does not exist.
Agnosticism thus believes that there is a reality behind the phenomena, but what that reality is we can never know. This is precisely because of the fact that an agnostic claims that the only valid source of knowledge is sense perception, and the thing in itself can never be known. It is known only as it affects our senses. The agnostic, therefore, does not accept that an intuitive knowledge of reality is possible. The intuitive knowledge of reality, as claimed by all mystics, is a knowledge beyond the antinomies of subject-object relationship, whereas for the agnostic this opposition between subject object is the very basis of knowledge, and can never be transcended. Even if the agnostic believes in revelation or intuition as a source of knowledge, he remains agnostic as long as he does not have his own first hand experience of the ultimate reality. In this category fall even religious thinkers like Mansel who believed in revelation, but could never attain this direct vision of reality.

The mystic, of course, never claims that he has solved the enigma of the origin and nature of the universe, during his intuitive apprehension of reality. But so satisfying his experience, is however so satisfying that all doubts are set at rest, and that uncertainty which gnaws an agnostic, disappears completely.

Like his brother Julian, Aldous Huxley remained an agnostic, with the difference that while the former adopted Evolutionary Humanism as a philosophy of life, the latter came to accept mysticism as a valid perceptive in the modern era. Sir Julian Huxley in his book Religion Without Revelation, frankly admits that he is an agnostic:

... I believe that one should be agnostic when belief one way or the other is near idle speculation incapable of verification; when belief is held nearly to gratify desires, however deep seated, and not because it is forced on us by evidence; and
when belief may be taken by others to be more firmly grounded than it really is, and so come to encourage false hopes or wrong attitudes of mind. (39)

Huxley remained an agnostic throughout his life. Up till the publication of *Eyeless in Gaza*, Huxley remained an agnostic who leaned towards scepticism, and mocked at mysticism, where as after 1936, he drifted towards mysticism, and came to accept intuition as source of knowledge. Huxley came to believe that the mystical experience was possibility, and that intuitive experience was far more superior to any kind of rational understanding. But, despite his professed belief in intuition and the Divine Ground, Huxley remained a religious agnostic. A formidable intellectual as he was, he could never rise above the intellectual plane. He never had any mystical experience, and remained an agnostic.

After this study of the philosophy of agnosticism—meaning of the term, its origin, brief history and comparison with other philosophical doctrines; let us see how it is reflected in the selected work of George Eliot, Thomas Hardy and Samuel Butler. The purport of the present study is critically examine the selected fictional writing of George Eliot, Thomas Hardy and Samuel Butler to show how and agnostic finds it difficult to arrive at any kind of moral or spiritual certainty. Each of them works out his own system whereby to examine the human character. Further, their attempt to discover their own system of values leads to the era of subjectivity. Man is to discover his values in his own interiority and this tradition continues till this day. The focus will remain in the analysis how agnosticism led these three novelists to represent the dilemma in their works. An effort will be made also to represent the dilemma of the modern split mind, the double consciousness of being
simultaneously aware of the rational and the spiritual, the two unreconciled strivings, the two warring ideas in his ever awake, and encyclopedic mind. This becomes a quest for a veritable Weltanschauung that can fuse these to modes of consciousness into an integral view of reality. Knowledge explosion in the present century has further added to man’s confusion. Knowledge leads to doubt and destroys values. Religion or science, faith or reason—modern man finds it difficult to make a choice. Oscillating within faith and reason, the modern writer remains an agnostic.