Chapter II

Agnosticism: Exposition and Postulates

Who created the universe, and who sustains it? Is it the expression of some Divine Power, or just an accidental collocation of atoms? Is there a Reality behind the shifting shadows of the perishable, material world? Is the ultimate nature of things akin to the spirit of man, or are all human values a sheer irrelevance in a wider, inhuman universe? Is the whole thing a vast, inexplicable mystery, or can we find some access to its ultimate significance? Ever since the dawn of consciousness, man has been seeking an answer to these obstinate questions. The answer has varied with the temper, the milieu and the religious philosophy of an age. From the animism of the primitive, tribal consciousness to the Emergent Evolution of the present day, the quest has persisted. The theist answers these transcendental inquiries on the assumption that the ultimate basis of things is a single, supreme reality named God, who is the supreme value and source of all finite existence. The atheist, on the other hand, asserts that beyond matter there is no other reality. In between the theist and the atheist, comes the agnostic, who maintains a belief in the ultimate reality, as the basis
of natural phenomena, but who claims that this reality can never be known. To the question whether there exists any living, conscious Power behind the various manifestations of natural phenomena, the agnostic, in the words of Richard A. Armstrong, answers: "We cannot tell; and even if there is, we cannot know it, nor have knowledge of its nature or its working."¹

Agnosticism is defined by E.L. Mascall as the doctrine which asserts that "man does not know and cannot know whether anything exists behind and beyond phenomena and in particular that we can know nothing about a first cause or an unseen world."² The doctrine asserts the primacy of experience, and does not accept whatever cannot be rationally justified. 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 conditioned by the objects of sense perception. Agnosticism neither affirms nor denies God's existence; it merely suspends judgment regarding the existence of God, the human soul and its immortality. It, of course, admits that there pervades a mystery in the universe, but mystery has remained a mystery, and thus remains unknown and unknowable. Experience is the only test of truth
for an agnostic, and "to appeal to experience," as Leslie Stephen puts it, "is to admit the fundamental dogma of Agnosticism." Whatever cannot be empirically justified, and therefore, cannot be scientifically known, must be kept in abeyance. It was this conviction which prompted T.H. Huxley to assert that agnosticism expresses 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 certainty. This is what Agnosticism asserts; and in my opinion, it is all that is essential to Agnosticism.

II

It was T.H. Huxley, who coined the term "agnosticism," to profess his attitude towards metaphysical entities, during his long debate with the religious dogmatists of his day. The term was suggested to Huxley by the Greek words (To the unknown God) which St. Paul found upon an altar in Athens as recorded in the Bible (Acts XVII. 23). Huxley describes the origin of the term in his own words:

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 last, 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 insoluble. 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 "agnostic".5

As opposed to the gnostics of the early Christian Church, who claimed a special revelation of the nature of the Divine, the agnostic, according to Huxley, asserts that man's cognitive capacities can never grasp the Absolute. Though the term was coined by Huxley, to express his attitude towards religious questions, the attitude had been professed before. It emerged in the philosophy of Pyrrho of Elis,6 who maintained, that one can neither affirm nor deny any knowledge of the trans-phenomenal realm of being, and that the reservation of judgment
is the only correct attitude towards things. Sextus Empiricus, whose writings are the only available source of knowledge of the Pyrrhonian movement in Greek philosophy, maintains, according to James Collins, "a sort of speculative agnosticism." Sextus points out that since the true nature of things can never be known, it is wise to go about the business of life, without much bothering about the nature of reality. Ataraxia or quietude was the chief objective of the Pyrrhonians, and they claimed, that this could be attained by suspending judgment on all such issues as are the chief concern of metaphysicians.

How can man know God, and establish a satisfying relationship with Him? The medieval philosophers endeavoured to justify the existence of God on the basis of faith. They asserted that it is not possible for the finite mind to know the Infinite. The part cannot apprehend the whole. Human reason, therefore, by its very nature, is incapable of knowing God. If the real nature of things forever escapes the philosopher, faith alone can provide certain truth about God and human destiny. Spiritual verities can be accepted on faith, for faith, in the words of James M'cosh, "is that operation of soul in which we are convinced of the existence of what is not before us, of what is not under sense of any other directly cognitive power."
St. Augustine is agnostic, to the extent, that he culminates his quest of God, with a humble acknowledgement, that God is above everything, we can say or think about Him. He does not repudiate reason, for it marks man's superiority over the rest of creation, His is a frank confession, that reason is inadequate to have insight or wisdom. He urges the seeker of salvation to accept on faith, the truths of revelation, which fall beyond the capacity of reason. Faith leads on to that final stage of knowledge, where man can experience the divine illumination, the direct awareness of the majesty of God.

St. Thomas Aquinas is even more emphatic than St. Augustine, about the limitations of the natural reason to comprehend God. He admits the distinction between reason and faith, and accepts with the agnostic, that the dogmas like the the Trinity, the Incarnation, the original sin, the creation of the world in time, cannot be demonstrated by natural reason. He says:

That certain divine truths wholly surpass the capability of human reason, is most clearly evident....the human intellect is incapable, by its natural power, of attaining to the comprehension of His essence : since our intellect's knowledge, according to the mode of the present life, originates from the senses ; so that things which are not objects of sense cannot be comprehended by the human intellect, except insofar as knowledge of them is gathered from sensibles.
St. Aquinas agrees with the rationalist, that human reason is a perfectly adequate instrument, so far as the knowledge of the natural world is concerned. But he goes a step further than the rationalist, when he admits that there are truths, which the unaided human reason can never attain. It is faith alone that can open doors to the ultimate mystery. The angelic doctors say: "For then alone do we know God truly, when we believe that He is far above all that man can possibly think of God, because the divine essence surpasses man's natural knowledge."  

III  
The medieval philosophers tried to effect a synthesis of reason and faith, by subordinating the former to the latter. They believed that the reason cannot contradict the conclusions of faith, for both originate from the same divine source. Moreover, they took the existence of God for granted, and therefore their epistemological position would not create difficulties in their apprehension of God. The epistemologies of Immanuel Kant, William Hamilton and others, made it difficult for them to accept the existence of God, for, like the medieval philosophers, they could never take the existence of God for granted. Reason was good, so far as the natural existence was
concerned, but it needed to be supplemented by faith, to attain beatitude, which, according to St. Thomas is the *ultimus finis* of human life. But, with the advent of the Renaissance in Europe, the hiatus between reason and faith grew wider, and a synthesis between the two seemed well-nigh impossible. The advancement of empirical sciences, with their emphasis on natural observation and scientific experimentation, accorded the primacy to reason, which it had never before so much enjoyed. The truths of religion were relegated to the realm of the unknowable. Consequently, the speculative thought of the post-Renaissance Europe runs into two separate, irreconcilable channels, of reason and faith. The number of those thinkers, who believe in scientific observation and rational demonstration, has grown large, and a majority of them have professed agnosticism as their attitude towards the religious hypotheses. Those, who still uphold the truths of religion as sacred to their hearts, try to defend their religion, against the agnostics and sceptics, on the plea, that reason is impotent to grasp the ultimate truth, and that man must accept on faith whatever cannot be rationally justified.

It was Francis Bacon who made us aware of the sharp division between revealed and natural knowledge, by asserting, that there are no truths, which can be both revealed and arrived at independently, by natural cognition.
This belief finds its philosophical justification in the empiricism of John Locke. Locke asserts that we can have no innate idea of God, and that the exclusive source of knowledge is, experience. The materials of knowledge and reason, says Locke, come: "from experience; in that all our knowledge is founded, and from that it ultimately derives itself." In Lockean epistemology, God figures nowhere, although he holds that it is possible to gain a demonstrative certainty about Him. Locke does not believe, that we can ever know the substance, and he remains, in the words of Archie J. Bahm, an "agnostic about the nature of real things." This conclusion, that the substances are finally unknowable, is a clear indication of the agnostic tendency, which gains ascendancy, in the philosophy of later philosophers, namely David Hume, Kant and others.

David Hume, in his quest of certitude in knowledge, reaches the most agnostic conclusions. Hume, whom T.H. Huxley reverently calls the "prince of agnostics," according to Bahm is, an "epistemological agnostic," for his agnosticism is the natural outcome of his empirical view of knowledge. Hume reduces all contents of consciousness to perceptions, which he divides into 'impressions' and 'ideas'. 'Impressions' include our sensations and emotions, whereas 'ideas' are the faint copies of 'impressions'. In the process of thinking, we connect 'impressions' and
'ideas' with such conceptions as causality, substance and subject. Hume contends that such conceptions cannot be derived from sense perceptions, which are the sole source of our knowledge. Such conceptions are derived from mere custom. Hume criticises the concept of causality on the ground, that we are accustomed to see in life that one thing follows another in time, we conceive that one must be the cause of the other. Thus, of a relation of succession, we make a relation of causality. Hume says that we have no right to affirm, that any such connection necessarily exists. Since we have "no other notion of cause and effect but that certain objects have been always conjoined together," and that "all our reasoning concerning causes and effects is derived from nothing but custom," the concept of causality can no longer be justified. This conclusion had the most startling consequences, for it undermined the most common argument for the existence of God. We cannot know whether God exists because our knowledge does not allow us to go further than sensations. The substance fares no better. Hume says:

The idea of a substance as well as that of a mode, is nothing but a collection of simple ideas, that are united by the imagination, and have a particular name assigned 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, though falsely, to be endowed with a perfect simplicity and identity." Thus, the Humean epistemology posits that any general view of the ultimate nature of things is not possible, and that human knowledge can never reach absolute certainty. But it also raises the most uncomfortable question. If sensations are the only source of knowledge, and there is no causality, who causes the sensations? Hume's answer is that of the agnostic.

As to those impressions, which arise from the senses, their ultimate cause is, in my opinion, perfectly inexplicable by human reason, and it will always be impossible to decide with certainty, whether they arise immediately from the object, or are produced by the creative power of the mind, or are derived from the Author of our being.19

Though his epistemology would not permit him to accept the existence of God, Hume, however, recognizes that the practical and passional tendencies in our nature require us to adhere to the existence of God. Apart from his belief, that faith in the existence of God, is necessary in practical life, to Hume, God remains an absolute riddle. Hume frankly admits: "The whole is a riddle, an enigma, an inexplicable mystery. Doubt, uncertainty, suspense of judgment appear, the only result of our accurate scrutiny concerning this subject."20

It was Hume's criticism of the concept of causality which aroused Immanuel Kant from his "dogmatic
slumber," and he took it upon himself to answer Hume's dogmatic agnosticism. Despite the fact, that Kant built an imposing epistemological system, to effect a compromise between agnostic empiricism and dogmatic rationalism, his conclusions, with regard to the nature of reality, nevertheless, remain agnostic. Kant agrees with Hume that sensations are the real basis of knowledge. "That all our knowledge begins with experience there can be no doubt," says Kant. Though the sense perceptions are essential to objective knowledge, these alone do not themselves constitute knowledge. These sense impressions are modified and systematized by the human mind. Knowledge, according to Kant, is a joint product, of the form prescribed by the mind, and the matter, provided by sensations. This means, that the only reality, of which we can acquire knowledge, is that, which is revealed to us, in and through experience. We cannot know objects as they are, but only as they affect us. We must then remain agnostics with regard to the real nature of things, what Kant calls the "things-in-themselves." Thus, Kant's epistemology sets limits to human knowledge. Knowledge cannot transcend experience, and we can have no knowledge of things-in-themselves; but only of things as they affect our consciousness. Therefore, we cannot have, as Frank Thilly observes, "a metaphysics of things-in-themselves, a metaphysics that can offer us genuine knowledge of a
The things-in-themselves or Noumena are unknown and unknowable. Noumena, however, exist, for without them, sensation is unexplainable. Corresponding to phenomena, there must be something, that affects our senses, and provides the material of our knowledge. Kant explains:

The conception of a noumenon...is necessary to restrain sensuous intuition within the bounds of phenomena, and thus to limit the objective validity of sensuous cognition; for things in themselves, which lie beyond its province, are called noumena for the very purpose of indicating that this cognition does not extend its application to all that the understanding thinks.

Kant, in fact, never doubted the existence of the thing-in-itself because his early pietist education had left an indelible impression on his mind, with regard to its existence. It was his epistemological system, which forced him to deny the existence of any substance, the self and God. Substance, which remains an "unknown substratum" for Locke, and which is totally denied by Hume, assumes the character of unknowability in the system of Kant. A.S. Pringle-Pattison aptly remarks: "Kant's world is, after all, as little the real world we desiderate as Hume's; with either we remain Agnostics." Kant destroys the cogency of the traditional arguments, that have been put forward by the philosophers and theologians, from time to time, to establish the
existence of God. But later on, he brings his own argument - the Moral argument - as the proof of the existence of God. Kant asserts that the existence of God is a necessary condition of morality. Morality cannot exist without God, freedom and immortality. We are, therefore, bound to postulate these, for the sake of the moral law. The existence of God for Kant becomes a matter of faith, which he substitutes for knowledge. In his preface to the second edition of Critique Of Pure Reason, Kant admits, that he found it necessary to "abolish knowledge, to make room for belief." But this belief does not lead to revelation, the direct intuitive insight into the nature of reality, when subject and object are merged into unity. This is precisely so because the Kantian agnostic epistemology does not posit any native capacity of the human soul, to transcend in intuition, the phenomenal level of experience. The hiatus between Faith and Reason becomes wider, in the system of Kant, and from the strict epistemological angle, despite his belief in theism, Kant remains an agnostic.

Kant's philosophy, by separating phenomena from the mysterious, unknowable, noumena, ensured certitude for science, and reduced metaphysics to an empty show. It was this distinction between science and metaphysics, which was seized upon by Auguste Comte,
and consequently his positivism is essentially agnostic in character. Positivism of Comte asserts that positive knowledge has an empirical basis, and arises out of the observation of observed facts. Comte agrees with Hume, that we cannot know the underlying causes or substances, and that we do not know the causes of sensations. Comte, like Kant, accepts that knowledge cannot transcend experience. But whereas Kant emphatically asserted his faith in the existence of a noumenon, Comte does not do so. But, to quote J.S. Mill, "neither does Comte deny the existence of the noumenon; on the contrary all his language implies it." 26

IV

Though Kant remains, observes A.S. Pringle-Pattison, "the fons et origo of the most cultured Agnosticism of the day," 27 it was William Hamilton's article on "Philosophy Of the Unconditioned," which proved the most significant source of the agnostic movement in the nineteenth century. Hamilton refutes Victor Cousin's claim, that we can have a knowledge of God, and endeavours to show, that only the conditioned and the limited can be the object of our knowledge:

Our whole knowledge of mind and of matter is relative, - conditioned, - relatively conditioned. Of things absolutely or in themselves, be they external, be they internal, we know
nothing, or know them only as incognisable; and we become aware of their incomprehensible existence, only as this is indirectly and accidentally revealed to us, through certain qualities related to our faculties of knowledge, and which qualities, again, we cannot think as unconditioned, irrelative, existent in and of themselves. All that we know is therefore phenomenal, phenomenal of the unknown.28

Hamilton's main thesis is: "To think is to condition." We determine everything, we are able to know, by its relation to something else, by which it is conditioned and limited. Moreover, all knowledge depends on a relation between the subject and the object, and we can never get beyond this opposition. If human knowledge is relative and is conditionally limited, then philosophy, according to Hamilton, ends in a docta ignorantia. Though he excludes God from real knowledge, he regards Him as an object of Faith. Hamilton says:

And by a wonderful revelation, we are thus, in the very consciousness of our inability to conceive aught above the relative and finite, inspired with a belief in the existence of something unconditioned beyond the sphere of all comprehensible reality.29

H.L. Mansel employed Hamiltonian views on the relativity of knowledge, to draw religious conclusions, which lay concealed in Hamilton's "agnosticism phenomenalism."30 In his defence of revealed religion, Mansel argues, that contradictions, into which we fall, while we try to think
of the unconditioned, arise not from the unconditioned itself, but from our mode of thinking. He argues that the difficulties which arise in theological opinions, will appear in any concept of the world whether based on reason or nature, for the contradictions are inherent in the very laws of human thought. Mansel 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 method of rationalism itself, not in the objects which it pretends to criticise.  

If reason is impotent to have an access to the Absolute and the Unconditioned, there are scriptures to depend upon. Therefore, whatever cannot be rationally comprehended must be accepted on faith. We "ought to believe," says Mansel, "in the existence of a God whose nature we are unable to comprehend." By emphasising the element of faith in religion, Mansel gives, as Metz comments, "the Kantian theory of knowledge a more definite turn towards sceptical agnosticism than did Hamilton," and the gulf between faith and knowledge, religion and philosophy, becomes all the more wide.

But the "foremost representative of Agnosticism," according to Leslie Stephen, is Herbert Spencer. His agnosticism rests on the familiar
epistemological arguments about the limitations of our cognitive capacities. Spencer asserts that the fundamental scientific concepts like time, space, motion, force, consciousness etc., can never unfold the mystery that lies behind the natural phenomena. These concepts are clear and applicable, so long as we do not go beyond the limited and relative world of experience. Reason loses itself in contradictions, what Kant termed "antinomies," when we employ it to express the nature of the Absolute. Human knowledge, according to Spencer, is relative, for the process of thought involves relation, difference and likeness. The absolute, the unconditioned, the first cause can never be known because it cannot be likened to or distinguished from anything else. Though the absolute and the unconditioned cannot be the object of our cognition, we may trust our instinctive feelings, that there exists a reality behind phenomena, and this reality he names the Unknowable. It is quite impossible, says Spencer, "to get rid of the consciousness of an Actuality behind Appearances, and from this impossibility results our indestructible belief in that Actuality."35

Spencer's agnostic belief in the existence of the Unknowable has been challenged on the ground, that, though he professes a belief in the reality behind
material phenomena, he nevertheless remains a materialist. The belief, which he shared with T.H. Huxley, that consciousness is an "epiphenomenon," certainly shows that Spencer tended towards materialism, to express his ideas about life and the universe. But a materialist does not go beyond matter, and never arrives at the Unknowable. Spencer, remains, in the words of H.E. Cushman, "a Monist and not a Materialist," for he says that the psychical and physical facts are the expressions of one underlying principle - the mysterious power, the Unknowable. Spencer claims that science and religion will ultimately reach a common conviction, that the innermost essence of the world is unknowable, and that both point to an inscrutable mystery. The recognition of this mystery, and the inability to unfold it, is what unites science and religion. It is this unification of science and religion, which according to Albert Simmons, gives rise to the agnostic philosophy. Albert Simmons, defending the Spencerian system, says:

This coalescence of Religion and Science forms the basis of the Agnostic philosophy. Advisedly we say Agnostic Philosophy, for Agnosticism is a philosophy. It is not, as some imagine, a religion; nor is it, as others suppose, a science. Religion always has some theory of original causation... Agnosticism declares all theories to be equally unthinkable, and therefore, equally worthless. Science always has some positive knowledge of the order existing
among phenomena... Agnosticism asserts the existence of something beyond phenomena. Hence, though neither Religion alone nor Science alone constitutes Agnosticism, yet the blending of the two produces the third.37

Herbert Spencer has not been the first philosopher to effect a synthesis of Faith and Reason, religion and science. The endeavour has been made since the days of Francis Bacon, but it has not been very successful. Religion does not merely point to the Unknowable, which can never be grasped. The mystical experience, which forms the central core of all religions of mankind, is, according to the mystics, an experience when one does come to know reality directly and intuitively. If 'intuition' as a way of knowledge is emphasized by religions, then religion and science cannot be united, for science does not accept whatever cannot be empirically justified, and the intuitive experience brings self-evident truths, which a scientist can never accept.

T.H. Huxley is less emphatic in his assertions about the ultimate reality than Herbert Spencer, though he, too, claimed that he was an agnostic, for no amount of empirical knowledge could ever rend the veil of mystery, which enshrouds the phenomenal world. Huxley, whom John Skeleton called the "John Knox of Agnosticism,"38 prescribes the agnostic approach towards religious
questions, on the ground that no scientific evidence can be warranted to show the validity of religious assertions concerning the existence of God, the human soul and its immortality. As a champion of Darwinism and science, Huxley put forth all his intellectual energy, to oppose the orthodox Christian believers, who were fighting their last-ditch battle to save their religion from the attacks of scientific materialism. In the bitter controversy that ensued between the Christian dogmatists (Dr. Wace and Gladstone) and Huxley, concerning the authenticity of the Biblical miracles, Huxley questioned the validity of these supernatural occurrences on the ground that miracles lack evidence. The only thing, that counted for Huxley as a scientific thinker, was evidence, and since the demonic-spiritual world of primitive Christianity lacked evidence, he felt, it was his duty to suspend judgment on all such questions.

Huxley's agnosticism is, therefore, an indication of doubt concerning those matters for which no evidence can be furnished, and which go against experience. Though he is not as emphatic about the existence of the Unknowable as Spencer, Huxley is "quite ready to admit that there may be some place, "other side of nowhere," par exemple, where $2 + 2 = 5$, and all bodies naturally repel one another instead of
gravitating together,“39 provided any scientific evidence can be brought forward, to justify any such contention. If the Deity is an epistemological inconvenience as Hume, Kant and Spencer have shown, and no evidence can be furnished to forestall its claim, then agnosticism is the only honest attitude towards its existence. In a world, where the intellectual was wandering, to quote Matthew Arnold, "between two worlds, one dead,/The other powerless to be born,"40 agnosticism was the only honest approach towards the noumenon.

William Irvine's suggestion that Huxley "felt loss of faith more deeply than many have supposed,"41 is quite true. Huxley was as much at a loss to see any justification for the shattered faith as any other honest Victorian intellectual. But his intellectual integrity would not allow him to adopt any quasi-mystical system such as the positivist religion of humanity, the neo-Hindu Theosophy or Christian Science, which many of his contemporaries adopted, to seek a way out of the impasse of mechanical materialism. Huxley says:

In matters of the intellect follow your reason as far as it will take you, without regard to any consideration. And negatively: In matters of the intellect do not pretend that conclusions are uncertain which are not demonstrated or demonstrable. That I take to be the agnostic faith, which if a man keep whole and undefiled, he shall not be ashamed to look the universe in the face, what the future may have in store for him.42
Though Huxley tries to maintain a kind of balance between materialism and idealism, it cannot be denied that his inclinations are certainly towards materialism, for, to quote Huxley, "with a view to the progress of science, the materialistic terminology is anyway to be preferred." V.I. Lenin's observation that Huxley's "agnosticism serves as a fig leaf for materialism" is, to some extent, justified. Huxley regards everything known as evolved from matter, and reduces consciousness as an "epiphenomenon" of cerebral operations without any power of influencing them. "In men, as in brutes," says Huxley, "there is no proof that any state of consciousness is the cause of change in the nature of the matter of the organism," and he believed that "we shall sooner or later arrive at a mechanical equivalent of consciousness." Despite this inclination towards materialistic mechanism, Huxley, however, remains open to any kind of argument that can establish the probability of the spiritual world. Thus, his agnosticism remains negative, and it does not assume that positive quality, which we find in Auguste Comte or Herbert Spencer. Huxley does not fill the vacuum caused by the disappearance of a personal God, by any ideal like Comte's *Grand Étre*, or Spencer's Unknowable.
Though in the present century, the term "agnosticism" has lost much of the vogue it enjoyed during the latter half of the nineteenth century, some philosophic movements of the day certainly show their leanings towards agnosticism. Pragmatism and Logical Positivism are agnostic to the extent that their epistemology forbids any knowledge of the absolute. "Pragmatism," observes, W.E. Hocking, "accepts the agnostic's judgment of the incompetence of 'pure reason' in metaphysics: the most important of our questions 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 basis of certainty." But if the intellect is not adequate to unfold the mystery, the pragmatists insist that an appeal must be made to "will" to achieve conclusions on the vital matters of belief. Since William James is considered to be the Chief spokesman of the pragmatist philosophy, we may consider him in detail.

William James, like the British empiricists, bases his theory of knowledge on the revelation of sense experience. He, however, rejects the old, atomistic psychology of the English school, which considered thought as a series of separate ideas mechanically associated. His stream of consciousness
theory emphasises, that experience is a flowing, continuous process, and consciousness is not a separate entity, but a flux and system of relations. This concept of consciousness brings to an end the old distinctions between mind and matter, subject and object. Reality is nothing but "pure experience" and experience needs no substratum. It is only for practical reasons that we depart from this flux of life, and impose distinctions upon the flux of experience. Thus, James's theory of knowledge does not allow him to look outside experience for metaphysical entities. But as a pragmatist, he asserts, that we may believe in any religious hypothesis if it satisfies our sense of belief. Knowledge, as John Dewey would agree, is an instrument of life, and if it does bring some useful purpose, it must be accepted, though it may not be rationally verifiable. To quote William James: "If theological ideas should do this, if the notion of God, in particular should prove to do it, how could pragmatism possibly deny God's existence." To a pragmatist, the universe remains a mystery as it does to the agnostic, but the pragmatist can make use of any metaphysical theory, provided it has the practical cash value.

Another significant philosophical movement of the day, which can claim some kinship with agnosticism, is Logical Positivism. The Logical Positivists, also
known as Logical Empiricists, agree with the early empiricist philosophers, that the sole source of human knowledge is sense perception, and that there exists no a priori truths, outside the realm of experience. Our notions or propositions are merely conventions, which are either verified or not, by sensible reality. According to B.A.G. Fuller:

"The elimination of metaphysics is accomplished on the basis of the claim that all metaphysical assertions are non-empirical and that therefore, no empirical method can be defined for their verification or confirmation." The positivists reject metaphysics on different grounds compared to Hume, Kant, Hamilton and Spencer. The earlier thinkers regarded metaphysical questions about the trans-phenomenal reality insoluble on the ground that human cognitive capacities were limited to the temporal and the finite; and that the reason would lose itself into contradictions, whenever it would endeavour to seek the absolute. But the logical positivists regard the metaphysical questions as the meaningless combination of words. To the agnostic, the statement "There is a God" is a genuine proposition, the truth value of which cannot be determined, whereas Logical Positivism, which H.H. Price calls "a new and more radical form of agnosticism" rejects such a proposition as meaningless, because it cannot be verified. Whatever statements are made by metaphysicians
concerning the trans-empirical reality are non-sensical. A. J. Ayer observes in this connection:

For we shall maintain that no statement which refers to a "reality" transcending the limits of all possible sense experience can possibly have any literal significance; from which it must follow that the labours of those who have striven to describe such a reality have all been devoted to the production of non-sense.51

The Logical Positivists do not believe in "intuition" as a mode of obtaining knowledge. They do not object that there may be ways to form propositions other than those employed by them. They contend that the claims of the mystic, who he has a direct, intuitive insight into a super-sensuous reality, cannot be logically justified, for his statements cannot be empirically verified. Ayer says:

The mystic so far from producing propositions which are empirically verified, is unable to produce any intelligible propositions at all - therefore his intuition has not revealed to him any facts...The fact that he cannot reveal what he "knows," or even himself devise an empirical test to validate his "knowledge" shows that his state of mystical intuition is not a genuinely cognitive state.52

Bertrand Russell, whose name was chiefly associated with Logical Empiricism, claims that he is an agnostic. He makes this assertion on the ground, that the "human intellect is unable to find conclusive answers
to many questions of profound importance to mankind," and refuses to believe that "there is some "higher"
way of knowing by which we can discover truths hidden
from science and the intellect."\textsuperscript{53} In his radio debate
on the B.B.C., with the Jesuit philosopher F.C. Copeleton,
Russell states his reasons why he is not a Christian.
He quite simply admits that his "position is agnostic,"\textsuperscript{54}
for he could not come to knowledge of God.

Russell refutes all the traditional arguments,
which have been used by the philosophers and theologians,
to assert the existence of God. He says that he is not
a Christian, for he does not believe, either in the
existence of God, or in the immortality of the soul.
He is an adherent to the scientific method, and "God and
immortality, the central dogmas of the Christian religion,
find no support in science."\textsuperscript{55} He does not admit any
method of arriving at truth except that of science.
"Whatever knowledge is attainable," says Russell, "must
be attained by scientific methods; and what science
cannot discover, mankind cannot know."\textsuperscript{56}

Another contemporary thinker, who claims himself
to be an avowed agnostic, is C.E.M. Joad. Joad says, that
for most of his life he has been "not only an agnostic
but a vocal and militant agnostic."\textsuperscript{57} Joad, like Russell,
asserts that as a rationalist he cannot accept the
religious hypothesis, and that to the discomfiture of
religious apologists, he has always put forward arguments
to show that the dogmas of Christianity are untenable. As a wistful agnostic, Joad accepts that "there is probably more in the universe than rationalism admits," and that the religious hypothesis may be accepted, for it seems to afford the most plausible explanation of most of the facts of human experience. But, on strictly rational grounds, he finds it utterly impossible to accept the existence of God. If God is just and good, as the theist would assert, then how can we account for the prevalence of evil in the world? He fails to find an answer, and evil seems to him to contradict the very notion of God. Similarly, he thinks that nothing positive can be posited about a future life, an extra-terrestrial existence. "For what happens after death," says Joad, "is unknown. Probably it is unknowable, and I prefer to bow to the unknowable, instead of, like many rationalists, cutting it dead." In the controversy between the mystic and the agnostic, the most convincing arguments are all on the side of the agnostic. As a sincere intellectual, the agnostic frankly concedes that the truth can never be known. Joad says:

As an agnostic, I felt convinced of two things; first, in regard to the matters which fall within the sphere of religion that we did not and probably could not know the truth; secondly, in regard to the so-called religious truths that I had been taught, as,
for example, that God created
the world as stated in Genesis
at a certain point in time, and
at another point in time sent
His Son into it to redeem mankind,
that it was improbable that they
were true and certain that they
could not be known to be true.60

The grandpater's mantle falls equally well
on the shoulders of the two Huxley brothers, Julian
and Aldous Huxley. While they still retain the
agnosticism of T.H. Huxley, they have, however, come
to acquire positive convictions about life and the
universe. Julian Huxley believes that "one should
be agnostic, when belief, one way or the other, is mere
idle speculation, incapable of verification."61 He
frankly concedes that he believes, "not that there is
nothing, for that I do not know, but that we quite
assuredly at present know nothing beyond this world
and natural experience."62 The belief in the existence
of a Personal God cannot be maintained by reasoned
conviction. Similarly, he finds no satisfactory argument
in regard to a belief in a future life. "As to the
existence of another world or another life at all,
there I am simply an agnostic,"63 asserts Huxley. He,
of course, believes in an ultimate world substance,
of which mental and material are two aspects, and he
named it "Power", a term akin to Spencer's "Unknowable".
The younger brother, Aldous Huxley, also remains an
agnostic, but since he is the chief subject of the
main argument, his agnosticism has been treated in separate chapters.

VI

Divers views have been expressed in regard to Buddha's silence on the existence of God, a future life, and the origin and nature of the universe. Whatever the Buddha's views may have been on these transcendental problems, he declined to engage in discussions on these questions, on the ground that such discussions were not helpful to the seeker of salvation. Buddha's teachings were compiled long after his death, and there is a certain amount of vagueness in them. We cannot, as S. Radhakrishnan comments, "say with certainty how much of the Canonical Buddhism is due to Buddha himself and how much is later development." In the Canonical literature, there are passages, which suggest, that, perhaps, the Buddha had agnostic leanings.

In the Brahmajāla Sutta, the 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 aversion to speculative thinking, for it does not help in the cessation of dukkha (pain), and liberation from the wheel of saṃsāra. Speculative concepts about the
metaphysical questions form a net in which the ignorant are caught. These metaphysical questions again appear in Majjhima-Nikaya, when Māluṅkyāputta, plunged in meditation, thinks that the Blessed One has not provided a clue to the puzzles of the world.

"These theories which The Blessed One has left unelucidated, 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 exists and does not exist after death, that the saint neither exists nor does not exist after death, — these The Blessed One does not elucidate to me."65

The Buddha likens the metaphysician to that foolish man, smitten 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. Hair-splitting metaphysical subtleties lead the seeker of Nirvāṇa nowhere. The Buddha tries to pacify the inquisitive Māluṅkyāputta:

"The religious life, Māluṅkyāputta, does not depend on the dogma that the world is eternal; nor does the religious life, Māluṅkyāputta, depend on the dogma that the world is not eternal. Whether the dogma obtain, Māluṅkyāputta, that the world is eternal of that the world is not eternal, there still remain birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation,
misery, grief, and despair, for the extinction of which in the present life I am prescribing."66

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 release the suffering being from his bondage to empirical existence. The Buddha says that he has no theories (ditthi); his teachings embrace the sakandhas only, the constituent elements of being, their beginning and end. The Blessed One tells Vaccha:

"The Tathāgata, O Vaccha, is free from all theories; but this, Vaccha, does the Tathāgata 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 the predispositions arise, and how the predispositions perish; the nature of consciousness, and how consciousness arises, and how consciousness perishes."67

When the Buddha tells Vaccha that his doctrine is profound, abstruse, and "not to be reached by mere reasoning,"68 he certainly emphasises the inability of reason to fathom truth, and thus sets limits to the investigation of reality. In the Milinda Pañha, when the Greek king Menander tells Nāgasena, the Buddhist sage, that the Buddha made no reply to the questions of Māluṅkyaputta, either out of ignorance, or out of his
wish to conceal something, Nāgasena 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 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 a Tathāgata exist after death? Does he not exist after death? Does he both exist and not exist after death? Does he neither exist or 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 Mālunkya-putta. And why such a question to be put on one side? 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.69

From this answer of Nāgasena, it becomes quite evident, that the Buddha's refusal to answer these questions, is certainly on the epistemological ground, for such questions do not fall in the purview of reason. The early Buddhist theory of knowledge is based on sensationalism and does not recognize any direct way of knowing reality.

M. Hiriyana in this context rightly remarks: "Buddha did not recognize anything beyond the sphere of perception
Moreover, Buddhism recognises no substance, and expressly denies the existence of soul. The Buddhist doctrine of impermanence reduces everything to becoming. Nothing is permanent, everything is in a state of flux, and changes from moment to moment. What we call the ego, is nothing but an aggregate of the five *sakandhae*, without any permanent, enduring reality named the *ätman* or the soul. Nāgasena makes the king understand the doctrine of no-soul by giving the illustration of a chariot. Nāgasena says:

> Just as the word "Chariot" is but a mode of expression for axle, wheels, chariot-body, pole, and other constituent members, placed in a certain relation to each other, but when we come to examine the members one by one, we discover that in the absolute sense there is no chariot... in exactly the same way the words "living entity" and "Ego" are but a mode of expression for the presence of the five attachment groups, but when we come to examine the elements of being one by one, we discover that in the absolute sense there is no living entity there to form a basis for such figments as "I am," or "I"; in other words, that in the absolute sense there is only name and form.71

Buddhism denies the existence of an eternal, personal God, as much as, it denies the existence of the soul. It considers God merely as a product of speculative thinking, which contributes nothing to the explanation of the world. As a philosophy of becoming, Buddhism cannot acknowledge the existence of an eternal, permanent God.
Buddha's denial of an everlasting, permanent self; his rejection of a personal God, and of any supernatural revelation; his belief that reality can be known only through sense perception and reason, are conclusions which certainly tend towards agnosticism. But the Buddha is not a negative agnostic, who claims that since the final reality is unknowable, the suspense of judgment, on metaphysical questions, is the only desirable attitude. We cannot bear with A.B. Keith, who is of the opinion, that the Buddha was a "genuine agnostic," for he had studied the various philosophical systems of his day, and finding no satisfaction from them, he had "no reasoned or other conviction on the matter," and that "agnosticism in these matters is not based on any reasoned conviction of the limits of knowledge," but on the ground that the Buddha "has not himself a clear conclusion on the truth of these issues."

To say that the Buddha had no reasoned conviction on metaphysical issues, and that he had no definite philosophy of life, is to negate entire Buddhism. There is no doubt that the Buddha knew more than he preached. In an age, when metaphysical theories grew with tropical exuberance, Buddha deemed it wise, to shun metaphysical subtleties, and to evade questions concerning first and final causes.
The Buddha, nowhere in the text, says, that he does not know. He merely evades the questions, for no amount of speculative thinking can ever lead to Nirvana. E.J. Thomas, in this context, aptly remarks:

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 certain definite problems, which were useless to the practical aim of the seeker after freedom from pain. To human reason they are problems still.

The Buddha's experience of Nirvana made him realize, that the absolute could not be described, for that would be to take a step out of the world of relativity. The absolute is not a matter of empirical observation, and experience can never unfold the mystery. The Buddha was, says T.R.V. Murti, "aware of the antinomical character of Reason," and his refusal to answer metaphysical questions was "the direct outcome of the awareness of the conflict in Reason." Though the Buddha uses the dialectical method of reasoning in his discourses, the saving insight comes to him, not through logical reasoning, but in a direct, intuitive way. The Buddha attains enlightenment, observes Keith, "in a complete intuition, the fruit of a long process, in which he has overcome all forms of empiric knowledge." If Nirvana is the ultimate goal of Buddhism, then we are
left in no doubt, that the Buddha acquired a positive conviction of reality, and his rejection of metaphysics implied his belief, that theoretic curiosity would lead the suffering being, tied to the wheel of birth and death, nowhere. S. Radhakrishnan seems to point out this pragmatic approach of the Buddha towards the real issues of life, when he says, that Buddha "adopts an attitude of pragmatic agnosticism about transcendental realities....Nothing is denied but the background is left open for any future reconstruction." If the Buddha was not a theist, nor was he an atheist. He was certainly a religious agnostic, who believed that by following the eight-fold middle path, one can attain Nirvāṇa. Of course, one could never convince a logical rationalist of the authenticity of the experience of the Nirvānic bliss, and a believer in the strictly rationalist method is bound to remain an agnostic.

VII

If reason has its own limitations, and cannot apprehend the nature of reality, we must resort to faith, asserts the religious thinker. But the agnostic, to quote Anne Harrison, "refuses to have any traffickings with faith." Reason should be ancillary to faith, asserts the man of religion, and faith should be tested on the basis of rational demonstration, claims the agnostic. The mystic and the agnostic both agree, that,
despite our best intellectual efforts to know, there remains an element of mystery in reality. But the mystic attains a direct vision of reality, a vision, which, he avers, he can never express, for it transcends all limits of intellectual experience, and therefore remains ineffable. The mystic is silent, not that he does not know like the agnostic, but because he has no language to express his experience of the super-sensuous reality. The mystic, like the agnostic, never suspends judgment on the vital problems of life. The mystic claims that there is a way, other than that of reason, to fathom truth, the way of intuition, the direct insight into the nature of things. The agnostic does not believe, that there is the method of intuition to reach the portals of truth. To the agnostic, Blaise Pascal's belief, that the "heart has its own reasons which reason does not know," is totally unacceptable. Even if the agnostic comes to share this belief, that there may be an intuitive way of knowledge, he remains an agnostic so long as he does not have his own first hand intuitive experience of reality. To the agnostic, the only valid source of cognition is sense-perception, and the super-sensuous can never be the object of knowledge. Moreover, the agnostic believes in the relativity of knowledge, and the Absolute, according to this contention, can never be known, for the Absolute is above all relations. Though
the agnostic believes, that there is a "reality" behind phenomena, and that this "reality" can never be the object of our knowledge, he does not believe that the human soul, if there is any, exists after death, for all these things are beyond reason, and lack evidence. To the question: what kind of evidence could convince an agnostic that God and the human soul exist, Bertrand Russell answers:

I think that if I heard a voice from the sky predicting all that was going to happen to me during the next twenty-four hours, including events that would have seemed highly improbable, and if all these events then proceeded to happen, I might perhaps be convinced at least of the existence of some superhuman intelligence. I can imagine other evidence of the same sort which might convince me, but so far as I know, no such evidence exists.81

Since this kind of evidence can hardly be available, the intellectual, in his search for the Real, is bound to end as an agnostic. Agnostics thus fall into two categories - the rational and the religious. Both the rational and the religious agnostics admit that reason has its own limits, and that the ultimate reality can never be apprehended through reason. The rational agnostic does not go beyond reason, and rejects all kinds of intuitive methods, which claim self-evident truths. The religious agnostic, on the other hand, accepts the
supreme value of the intuitive experience, on the basis of testimony, but remains an agnostic, because he fails to have any intuitive grasp of reality. The religious agnostic seeks refuge in faith, for the natural reason fails to lead man to the realm of spiritual experience. Whatever cannot be rationally justified, must be accepted on faith, claims the religious agnostic. He asserts that faith is needed to cross the barrier, that reason creates between man and God. Unable to understand God, he fails on faith. But the rational agnostic fails to give, what Cardinal Newman calls "assent," to the verities of religion. While the one is filled with humility, for he is nothing before the Infinite, the other jeers at the conception of such a powerful, incomprehensible Being.

Agnosticism, thus seen in its historical perspective, shows that the rift between Faith and Reason has continued to widen. Despite the best efforts of some philosophers, no synthesis has been effected. The medieval theologians endeavoured to subordinate reason to faith, whereas in the post-Renaissance Europe, the general tendency has been to condemn faith as superstitious, and to extol reason as the most reliable guide, in the apprehension of reality. With the advance of empirical sciences, reason has come to acquire an inordinate prestige, and faith has been relegated to the
realm of religion. It seems faith and reason will never meet, and the dissociation of sensibility would result in increasing agnosticism. The twentieth-century intellectual, of course, realises the inadequacy of reason, to probe into the mystery, and believes that the tender light of faith alone can lead the human heart to the divine. But he lacks faith, and despite his best efforts, he fails to accept on faith the spiritual values, for his intellect always acts as a stumbling block, on his way to the acceptance of the Divine. Consequently, he suffers from the schism in the soul, caused by the opposition of faith and reason, and therefore ends as an agnostic, in his quest of the divine reality. Aldous Huxley perhaps best represents the plight of the Western intellectual, who fails to accept the truths of religion on faith, for his logic-chopping faculty would always raise questions, in regard to the matters of religion, which faith commands him to accept unquestioningly. Huxley's agnosticism, therefore, forms the subject of analysis in the next chapter.
Notes

1Richard A. Armstrong, Agnosticism And
Theism In The Nineteenth Century: An Historical
Study Of Religious Thought (London: Philip Green,
1905), p.15.

2E.L. Mascall, "Agnosticism", Chambers's
Encyclopaedia, New Revised Edition (Oxford: Pergamon

3Sir Leslie Stephen, An Agnostic's Apology And

4T.H. Huxley, Science And Christian Tradition

5Ibid., pp.237 - 239. Similarly, in another
essay, T.H. 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.

The world regards such a person as the
police do an unmuzzled dog, not under
proper control. I could find no label
to suit me, so, in my desire to range
myself and be respectable, I invented
one; and, I did not know a great many
things that the - ists and - ites about
me professed to be familiar with, I
called myself an agnostic.

Evolution And Ethics (New York: D. Appleton
R.H. Hutton, in his letter dated 13 March 1881, gives a different account of the first occurrence of the word "agnostic". He says that the word was "Suggested by Prof. Huxley at a party held previous to the formation of the now defunct Metaphysical Society at Mr. James Knowles's house on Clapham Common, one evening in 1869 in my hearing. He took it from St. Paul's mention of the altar to the 'Unknown God'.


6 About Pyrrho's agnosticism, Diogenes Laertius writes:

...a most noble philosophy...taking the form of agnosticism and suspension of judgment. He denied that anything was honourable or dishonourable, just or unjust. And so, universally, he held that there is nothing really existent, but custom and convention govern human action; for no single thing is in itself any more this than that.


7 James Collins, God In Modern Philosophy (Chicago : Henry Regney Company, 1959), p.34.


10 ibid., p.267.


16 ibid., BK. I, p.179.


18 ibid., BK. I, p.200.

19 ibid., BK. I, p.87.


32. Ibid.,


34. Leslie Stephen, An Agnostic's Apology And Other Essays, p.8.


45 T.H. Huxley, Method And Results, p. 244.

46 ibid., p. 191.


52. ibid., p. 120.


55. ibid., p. 39.


59. ibid., p. 71.


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 crisis, 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 these 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 came to believe that intuition will give the right answer to every man who will allow it rise above thought. Talking about his spiritual regeneration, Palmer says:

I've come round full circle for I started with Christianity, left it to be an Agnostic, then became an Atheist for a short time, and then, though always an Agnostic, returned by a mixture of Spiritualism, Mysticism and intellectual probing, together with a gradual alignment of probing, together with a gradual alignment of ethical conduct through self-discipline and some degree of self-denial, to the cleansing personal revelation, which allowed of the focus on the underlying thin gold line of general revelation.


Similarly, Fr Bassett in his book _We Agnostics_ gives us an account of the conversion of a certain agnostic Henry Dawes, to whom the vision of ultimate reality was vouchsafed during a moment of intuitive insight. It was the realization of the absurdity of human existence, which threw him off his balance of agnosticism towards a more life-affirming attitude, and the agnostic laughter was replaced by ineffable peace. Henry Dawes says:
An awareness of life draws one to 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 his Divinity on paper, I became aware that Jesus Christ was living and that he was the incarnate God.
