Does Agnosticism entail Inquiry?

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

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1. Introduction

In her paper “Why Suspend Judging?” Jane Friedman argues that “suspending judgement about $Q$ entails inquiring into $Q.$”¹ Call this the agnostic-as-inquirer thesis. For Friedman, inquiring into some question, $Q$, does not require engaging in some kind of investigative activity, like asking questions, looking up information online or conducting experiments in a laboratory. Rather, inquiring into $Q$ involves possessing an attitude of openness and sensitivity to information that is relevant to answering $Q$. In sum, inquiry, for Friedman, is a “frame of mind” rather than an activity.² The question I wish to consider is this: does the fact that one is agnostic about $Q$ entail that one has an inquiring attitude towards $Q$? I will defend a negative answer to this question.

In order to establish some common ground between Friedman and me, I will be making the following pair of assumptions. First, following Friedman, I conceive of agnosticism as an “attitude of committed neutrality” and not merely as the absence of belief and disbelief.³ For example, a pre-schooler who has never heard of String Theory, and has therefore never considered whether String Theory is true, is correctly described as neither believing nor disbelieving that String Theory is true. However, it does not follow that the pre-schooler is

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¹ Friedman (2015: 13).
² Friedman (2015: 14).
³ Friedman (2015: 3). This is a thesis Friedman has argued for at great length (I believe convincingly) in Friedman (2013b).
agnostic about whether String Theory is true. Instead, this would be a case in which an agent simply lacks any doxastic attitude about whether String Theory is true.4

Second, following Friedman, I will assume that someone has an inquiring attitude towards Q just in case Q is on his or her “research agenda.”5 Having Q on one’s research agenda minimally entails that one has the aim of answering Q. Friedman puts the point as follows:

In general we can say that we are in this sort of inquiring frame of mind with respect to Q when (and only when) Q is on our research agenda. I take it that our research agendas record our epistemic goals by way of the questions we wish to answer…. ”[I]n inquiring into some question we aim to resolve or answer the question—we aim to (e.g.) know the answer to the question”(Italics mine).6

Combining the preceding pair of assumptions, we may characterize the agnostic-as-inquirer thesis as the claim that an agent has an attitude of committed neutrality towards Q only if she has the aim of knowing the answer to Q. It is this claim that my paper seeks to impugn.

2. The Agnostic Astronomer Counterexample

According to our currently leading cosmological theories, the following question is unanswerable:

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

Firstly, Q1 is a question about an astronomical object that exists outside of our Hubble sphere. A Hubble sphere is the spherical region surrounding an observer (with a radius of roughly 14.4 billion light years) beyond which objects recede from the observer at a rate greater than the speed

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4 See Friedman (2013b: 165ff) for a discussion of this point.
5 Friedman (2015: 14).
of light due to the expansion of the universe. Because the speed of light constitutes the upper limit by which any information can be transmitted, no information leaving an object that exists outside of our Hubble sphere—i.e., an object receding away from us at a rate greater than the speed of light—could, in principle, ever reach us. This means that any object or event occurring outside our Hubble sphere is unobservable.

Secondly, the subject matter of Q1 is so specific that the question could only be answered by observing the region of space that the question is about. A double-ringed galaxy is the rarest type of galaxy ever observed. Hence, even if we assume that the unobservable universe is similar to the observable universe, we would not be warranted in assuming that there is such a galaxy in a particular unobserved region of space in the way that we would be warranted in assuming that there are hydrogen atoms in a particular unobserved region of space. Moreover, there is a great deal of variation in how many stars a galaxy may contain. Hence, that there is a galaxy with exactly 129 thousand million stars in a particular region of space is too specific a claim to be adjudicated without observation of that region of space.

With these points in mind, here is a description of the case that will form the focal point of my primary argument:

\textit{Agnostic Astronomer:}

At time \( t_1 \), a young amateur astronomer, Jocelyn, begins inquiring into Q1: is there a double-ringed galaxy containing exactly 129 thousand million stars located exactly 1.3 billion light years beyond our Hubble sphere? At the beginning of her investigation, Jocelyn recognizes that she currently lacks sufficient information to answer Q1. This recognition prompts Jocelyn to adopt an attitude of committed neutrality towards Q1 at \( t_1 \). At \( t_2 \), following a brief period of research into the matter, Jocelyn forms the justified belief that it is impossible to acquire the kind of specific information necessary to answer Q1 given that doing so would require observing a region of space that it is, in principle, impossible to observe. In other words, Jocelyn comes to believe that Q1 is, in principle, unanswerable. Furthermore, this belief prompts Jocelyn to do two things at \( t_2 \): First, it prompts her to resign herself to an attitude of committed neutrality with respect to Q1. Given her belief that not only is her currently
available information insufficient for answering Q1, but also that she will never acquire sufficient information to answer Q1, Jocelyn judges that it would be best to maintain an attitude of committed neutrality towards Q1 and chooses to do so. Second, it prompts her to intentionally give up the aim of answering Q1. Given that she now believes it would be pointless to try to answer Q1, Jocelyn judges that it would be best to give up her aim of answering Q1 and chooses to do so.

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

P1. If it is plausible that Jocelyn does not have the aim of answering Q1 at t₂ and it is plausible that Jocelyn has an attitude of committed neutrality towards Q1 at t₂, then the agnostic-as-inquirer thesis is implausible.

P2. It is plausible that Jocelyn does not have the aim of answering Q1 at t₂.

P3. It is plausible that Jocelyn has an attitude of committed neutrality towards Q1 at t₂.

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

3. A Reply to the Agnostic Astronomer

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

I think that the general difficulty is this: the sorts of cases in which it seems clearest that the subject is not in an inquiring mode with respect to Q are ones in which the subject has absolutely no interest
in \( Q \) or resolving \( Q \) at all. And the problem is that once we start to describe these sorts of circumstances we also start to describe circumstances in which it seems implausible that the subject has any sort of attitude towards \( Q \). We simply don’t tend to have attitudes towards contents that we don’t care about in the least.\(^7\)

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

\[Q_2: \text{What was the name of Socrates’ wife?}\]

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

\(^7\) Friedman (2015: 19).
interested in $Q$ in the answer-seeking sense is not necessary for having “any sort of attitude towards $Q$”.

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

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

Consider the following analogy from the case of intention. Suppose that the question of whether I should eat some vegemite is one that has never occurred to me. Given this fact, it would be accurate to say that I do not have the intention to eat vegemite. However, by that very same token, it would also be accurate to say that I do not have the intention not to eat vegemite. The question of whether I should eat vegemite is simply not one that has held my attention in the way required for me to have either intention. But suppose I am offered some vegemite while visiting a friend in Melbourne. Now that the question sufficiently has my attention, I may decide to either eat some or refrain from doing so. Which of the two intentions I adopt will depend on
certain facts about my motivational state at the time. Do I desire to try something novel? Am I especially disgusted by yeast-based foods? Am I afraid of offending my host by turning down their offer to try a local delicacy? But notice, whichever intention I adopt, it would have been true that the question of whether to eat vegemite holds my attention in a manner necessary for me to adopt some sort of attitude towards it, including the attitudes of intending to eat it or intending not to eat it. This follows from the fact that I am free to adopt either intention. It is in this sense that having a question hold one’s attention in the manner required for having any sort of attitude towards it falls short of one having some specific attitude towards it. The practical question of whether to eat vegemite may hold my attention in the manner required for me to adopt the attitude of intending to eat it and yet I may choose not to eat any (based on my overall motivational state at the time). Likewise, a theoretical question, like Q1, may hold my attention in the manner required for me to adopt the aim of answering it, and yet I may choose to refrain from adopting the aim of answering it (based on my overall motivational state at the time).

Another way the proceeding point may be put is to say that having the aim of answering a question is not the sole manifestation of its holding one’s attention. Insofar as deciding to give up the aim of answering a question is possible only if the question holds one’s attention in the manner necessary for having any sort of attitude towards it, then deciding to give up the aim of answering a question may itself be a manifestation of the relevant kind of interest in it (i.e., interest in the attention-holding sense). On this view, deciding to refrain from inquiring into a question is as much a stance towards it as is deciding to inquire into it. Both decisions require that we be interested in the question enough to adopt some sort of attitude towards it.

Ex hypothesi, this is the kind of situation Jocelyn is in. At time $t_s$, Q1 does hold Jocelyn’s attention in the manner required for her to have any sort of attitude towards it. Moreover, we may also assume that Q1 holds her attention in the manner necessary for her to have an inquiring attitude towards it. However, this does not settle the question of whether Jocelyn has an inquiring attitude towards Q1. Whether she does will depend on facts about her overall motivational state at the time. Moreover, the facts about Jocelyn’s overall motivational state at the time are these: (i) she believes that her evidence warrants agnosticism towards Q1 and she is motivated to adopt the doxastic attitude that is warranted by her evidence, and (ii) she believes that since Q1 is
unanswerable, it would be pointless to have the aim of answering Q1, and she is motivated to avoid having attitudes she deems to be pointless. Notice that so characterized, it is false that Jocelyn has absolutely no interest in Q1. On the contrary, we may suppose that Q1 continues to hold her attention in the manner necessary for her to both suspend Q1 and have an inquiring attitude towards Q1. However, once we register that which attitudes an agent actually adopts will largely depend on her overall motivational state at the time, it becomes clear how it might be possible for an agent to be agnostic about Q at some time, t, without having an inquiring attitude towards Q at t. If an agent is motivated to have an attitude of agnosticism towards Q (e.g., she believes that doing so is warranted by her available evidence), but is also motivated to give up her aim of answering Q (e.g., because she believes it would be pointless to have such an aim given that Q is unanswerable), then her overall motivational state may be such that she is motivated to be agnostic about Q at t and to refrain from having an inquiring attitude towards Q at t.

References


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