

Bananas, Beliefs and The Being:  
A Pragmatic Refutation of Determined Agnostheism and its Harmful Effects

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## Introduction

Is the claim that “God’s existence is unknowable” a valid premise for a religious belief? This paper seeks to argue that “determined agnosticism”, a specific version of agnosticism that claims the existence of God unknowable, is an inadequate assertion. “Determined agnosticism” is a logically conceivable proposition that many individuals assert as a religious belief, yet, due to its claim that knowledge on God’s existence is ultimately unfathomable, its originating premise eliminates it from religious discussions. Previous philosophers of religion such as Richard Dawkins have expressed dissatisfaction with the “wishy-washy” tendencies of agnosticism, but none have gone as far as to prove its argument as incoherent. In order to accomplish this goal of proving this specific version of agnosticism as a false religious belief, an analytic approach that focuses on an explicit use of definitions, premises, and conclusion is implemented. The paper defines basic terms such as belief, doubt, and religion, followed by a contextual explanation of the most commonly held religious positions in relation to each other, namely atheism and theism. Next, agnosticism is explicitly defined, introducing the new term “determined agnosticism”. This version of agnosticism is evaluated under its logical existence as a proposition, and its actual existence as a religious belief using a process of logical deduction, implementing modus tollens. Lastly, the use of the label of “agnostic” is exposed as harmful to both philosophers and others. Invalidating the premise for “determined agnosticism” will allow individuals and philosophers to hold dialogue regarding the religious belief on God’s existence.

I wish you were either cold or hot.  
So, because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold,  
I will spit you out of my mouth.

-Revelation 3:15-16

## Metaphysical Definitions

My proof of agnosticism as a false religious belief relies on a few underlying premises about the nature of belief, doubt and religion. In this section, I will focus on the definitions of these terms so that a uniform framework can be used moving forward.

### *Belief and Doubt*

Drawing from Charles Peirce's pragmatic roots, I will define belief as, fundamentally, a habit (Peirce 1955, 27). A habit is a patterned performance of certain decisions made, the decisions entailing action. For example, take the proposition that bananas are yellow. If I have the belief that bananas are yellow, this belief doesn't exist out in limbo. It inevitably leads to certain actions in my relation to bananas. My belief that bananas are yellow will lead me to using only yellow bananas (instead of maybe green, brown, or spotted ones) whether it be for eating, for use in a recipe, or even for appeasing a hostile approaching monkey. Hence, every belief in a proposition has a practical, habitual decision that corresponds with it. A belief entails an action. Even the simple belief that bananas are yellow.

Now, the reversal is also true. An action always entails a corresponding belief. As soon as I am in a situation where a banana is proposed, say a banana bread recipe, I must use a banana and so adhere to a corresponding belief about what color bananas are. I wouldn't decide to use a yellow banana for the recipe unless I believed that bananas are yellow. Such is the way an action entails a belief.

Now, Peirce draws the distinction between belief and doubt in the decision-making process before an action is actually committed. “Most frequently doubts arise from some indecision, however momentary, in our action” (Peirce 1955, 27). Where belief entails decision, doubt entails indecision. Doubt is the pause, the hesitation, the deliberation before I decide what I’m going to act on and believe in. Let’s say I doubt the proposition that bananas are yellow. During this time, I would refrain from using yellow bananas in my recipe since I’m unsure about what color bananas are. So, doubt entails no action.

However, while action and belief are biconditionally related, the same is not true for no action and doubt. No action does not imply doubt. Imagine again the proposition that bananas are yellow. Maybe I haven’t encountered a banana bread recipe or maybe I simply don’t want to make the bread. In either case, I’m not acting with bananas, but I’m not sitting there trying to decide whether bananas are yellow either. I don’t have to deal with them at all, so the deliberation process is eliminated, and doubt on bananas ceases to exist. If doubting implies mere deliberation, I must have something to deliberate in order to doubt in the first place.

Let’s take a recap of what I have just established, minus the banana talk. Belief entails the subscription to a proposition that is exhibited through a habitual action. Any action that I perform is related to some kind of belief that I hold in an affirmed proposition. Doubt entails the hesitating, deliberating process towards a proposition before it is either acted on or not acted on as a belief.

*Introducing... Religion!*

Now, having our conceptions of belief and doubt properly grounded, we can move a bit closer to our beloved agnosticism. However, a consultation with religion is vital before a legitimate examination can occur.

You've probably heard this claim numerous times, "I'm not a religious person, but I am a spiritual person". Maybe you've even made this claim yourself. The ordinary conception of religion lies as a particular set of doctrinal practices that are required from some kind of positive affirmation on a transcendence. Religion is seen as dogmatic, bossy. It tells you precisely what you ought to do rather than what you feel like you want to do, and this indeed *is* religion! Religion is the set of ethical actions one is committed to.

To situate it in the context of belief and doubt, if religion is simply the set of the rule-governed, moral decisions one habitually makes, a religious belief is the corresponding proposition that is subscribed to in accordance with these actions. But what might the content of this religious belief entail? I briefly alluded to how religion is typically associated with a positive belief on a transcendence. While I will explore this more thoroughly in the section that follows, I would like to note here that this is due to the rule-governing qualities of ethical practices. When one makes a moral decision, it is one that is meant to be applied to all other decisions like it. In this theory of ethics, I draw from Christine Korsgaard's ethics of normativity where ethical standards, "Do not merely *describe* a way in which we in fact regulate our conduct. They make *claims* on us; they command, oblige, recommend, or guide" (Korsgaard 1996, 8). Ethical decisions have a normative, transcending quality to them, and so their corresponding beliefs are on a transcendent being. Many times, this transcendence is called 'God', but in what follows we

will see that this not always the case. Nonetheless, as I define it, religion is moral action, and so religious belief entails a proposition on transcendence.

Thus, concludes our metaphysical groundwork laid down before our discussion of contemporary religious beliefs can be understood. A belief in a proposition entails action. Action likewise entails belief in a proposition. Doubt is the lack of action towards a certain proposition while it is being deliberated upon. A religion is the set of moral actions one subscribes to according to their religious belief on some kind of transcendence, one that is commonly referred to as 'God'.

### **Theism, Atheism and Agnosticism**

How does this all fit into what I want to say about agnosticism? Again, my goal is to prove that it is proposition that cannot be held as a religious belief. Though in order to prove it a false belief, it is helpful to understand where the agnostic position comes from. To do this, it is important to examine the alleged dichotomous choice one seems to have regarding the religious belief on a transcendence. After this, I will demonstrate how agnosticism fits into this "dichotomy".

#### *Theism and Atheism*

When somebody is asked any simple, basic question, there are two simple, basic answers. The same goes to the religious question on a transcendent being. Think about it. You bring your significant other home to meet the family for the first time and your obnoxious grandmother posits the uncomfortable question, "Do you believe in God?". You cringe as you wait in the

ensuing awkward silence for your significant other to say one of those one-syllable words that have the potential to spoil the meal, and maybe the relationship.

Yes or no. Theism or atheism. Under the popular conception, there is one decision regarding the God Question that is very narrow and simplified. This makes a neat black and white distinction. It certainly has the potential to make the discussion shorter. Unfortunately, questions on religious belief aren't like questions used in "Guess Who". The God question, or more accurately in this case, the question of God's existence, is not a black and white dichotomy, but more like a colorful spectrum of white light. To get a clearer perspective of this reality, it may help to turn to the etymology of these two terms.

Taking the words apart brick by brick, let's start with the suffix '-ism', since the two at least have this in common. Coming from the Greek suffix '-ισμός', '-ism' is used to make action nouns from verbs (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "-ism, suffix"). Adding the suffix '-ism' to any base of a word gives a new, necessary action to the base. It entails a set of practices related to the base itself.

For example, I have a good friend named Maddi who has a lot of different quirks in regard to her food choices. To name a few, she doesn't eat the seeds of cucumbers, she only likes her bananas perfectly green, and she refuses to eat the skin on her grapes. My cognitive language abilities along with the English suffix '-ism', allow me to create a new word, 'Maddi-isms', that makes up these little idiosyncratic actions. However, these Maddi-isms are not only defined by random practices that Maddi engages in. The Maddi-isms are unique to her. *Maddi* is the one that believes cucumber seeds are the babies of the fruit, *Maddi* is the one that believes that a yellowed banana is a rotting banana, and *Maddi* is the one that believes the grape skins contain lectins that our bodies aren't meant to ingest. Hence the way '-isms' are specially related to their base word.

They make action nouns out of stagnant nouns. Here it is clear again how actions and their beliefs, or in this case, bases, are fundamentally related.

So, theism and atheism both share this action producing ‘-ism’. They both entail some kind of action concerning their base belief. But what is their base belief exactly? What is the ‘Maddi’ to their ‘-ism’? This seems to be where their differences lie, so an examination of this too is warranted. To start with the simpler ‘the-’, the ‘the-’ in theism stems from the Greek ‘θεός’ which just means ‘god’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “theism, *n.1*”). A god, broadly construed. A transcendence even. So, we have the base word ‘god’, add our suffix ‘-ism’, and we have ‘god-isms’. Actions or practices relating to God<sup>1</sup>. This sounds an awful lot like a religion, and so it should. Theism entails a wide variety of religions and could even be considered a religion itself. However, it is most commonly used as a philosophical ideology that is incorporated into the belief system of other religions.

Notice, then, the only difference between atheism and theism is the prefix ‘a-’. From the Greek prefix ‘ἀ-’, we get the meaning ‘not’ or ‘without’ in front of our base meaning, ‘god’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “a-, *prefix6*”). So, with ‘athe-’, we have ‘not or without god’. Atheism then is the belief and corresponding actions related to a positive assertion on no God.

However, the negative prefix is not the only one that I can add to the base belief, ‘the-’. Traditionally, this is the one our minds naturally may gravitate towards, and it is certainly the way the argument is presented in modern conversation. We like our simple “yes” and “no”. It’s easier, faster, and simpler that way. But truly, a wide variety of other prefixes do exist on par with the negation ‘a-’ in regard to the base belief ‘the-’. Stick on the ‘-ism’, and you get a whole

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that theism is defined by belief in ‘god’ with a lowercase ‘g’, but throughout this paper I largely default to the God of the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam). This is only to maintain the way in which the question of God’s existence is typically framed regarding my western audience.



wide range of beliefs on transcendence. Pantheism. ‘Pan’ meaning “all” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “pan-, *comb. form*”) god, and its corresponding ethical ‘-isms’. ‘Poly’ meaning ‘many’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “poly-, *comb. form*”) gods, and its corresponding ethical ‘-isms’. ‘Mono’ meaning ‘one’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “mono-, *comb. form*”) god, and its corresponding ethical ‘-isms’. ‘Auto’ meaning ‘self’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “auto-, *comb. form*2”) god, and its corresponding ethical ‘-isms’.

The point here is that religions don’t exist in monochromes, but in technicolor. The ‘the-’, the God position, is the base for every other colorful gradation. Because we are so used to yes-and-no questions, so used to input-output responses, ‘yes’ and ‘no’ are our go-to’s. It seems like the ‘no’ entails atheism, and the ‘yes’ entails a rainbow of religions existing within the white light of theism.

However, even within monotheism, for example, there are more subdivisions, more color gradations like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Under the popular conception, these are obviously religions corresponding to a belief in God. However, it is often thought, since atheism posits that there is no transcendence, that it is disqualified as a religion. Most people, when considering themselves atheist, wouldn’t consider themselves religious (even ‘spiritual’ people don’t consider themselves religious). Nonetheless, atheism is a religious belief, entailing action, that has just as many colorful gradations within it as theism. Since atheism being a religious belief may seem a little backwards to some, it is worth exploring.

### *A Glimpse into Atheist Religions*

Here I will do such exploring. As I have just established, atheism too is a religious belief since it decides on the question of transcendence. Since it is a religious belief, it has corresponding ethical actions, or religions. So, what are some atheist religions and what specifically might their ethical codes be?

#### Buddhism

Buddhism is a perfect example of one of these atheistic religions. Here again we see how religion is primarily centered around the ‘yes’ to the God Question as Jay Garfield, in an interview with Gary Gutting, explains how Buddhism is often considered a rocky topic in religious studies (Gutting 2017, 157). Buddhism doesn’t even believe in a self. Its metaphysics maintains that all phenomena are impermanent, interdependent, and lacking intrinsic qualities (Gutting 2017, 160). Yet, it is undeniably religious. The four noble truths are the fundamental beliefs of all Buddhists. The fourth truth contains the eightfold path which outlines eight practices, eight “rights” that will eventually alleviate the suffering that is caused by our misunderstanding of reality. Only after following these ethical codes of conduct can we hope to achieve enlightenment like the Buddha (Gutting 2017, 160).

In short, the eightfold path is the religion of Buddhism. Its instructions on right view, resolve, speech, conduct, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and meditation are practices that guide believers in what they ought to do and ought not to do. For example, many Buddhists live lives of abject poverty to practice right livelihood. As a part of right conduct, many Buddhists abstain

from eating meat. To avoid vanity and practice right resolve, many Buddhist monks shave their heads (Taylor 2005, 234).

We can see that Buddhism clearly has religious, ethical practices. Therefore, it is a religion in the sense that it prescribes certain ethical actions for believers to follow, and it is atheist in that it claims there is no transcendence, no soul, no God. So, it seems atheism still produces religions.

### Kitcher's Secular Humanism

One could argue Buddhism is a cheap shot. Even though it denies the soul, at least some versions of it seem to believe in a kind of transcendent enlightenment in its cycle of rebirth and its striving for the somewhat mystical Buddhahood (Taylor 2005, 235). Nonetheless, there are other atheist religions that people practice. Philip Kitcher's secular humanism is another example. Kitcher's theory sees religion as an important component of ethical evolutionary development, one that is historically significant for the formation of our human species. He acknowledges an objective moral code, but he holds fast to the idea that this objectivity exists while also claiming there is no transcendence, God, *θεός*. Hence, his atheism. He describes ethics as a "social technology" that was developed from our hominid ancestors who were caught in the predicament of desired group living and "limited responsiveness" to each other's needs (Kitcher 2015, 41-42). His Secular Humanism is almost like a social naturalism for morals, but he maintains an objective ethics, saying truth "happens" to an idea based (Kitcher 2015, 45) on ethical "discoveries" we are constantly making as a human species (Kitcher 2015, 29).

So, what would the religion, the patterned habits, of a secular humanist look like? Kitcher does not spell out any specific codes of conduct for the life of the Secular Humanist. For him, ethical truths in the current tense remain vague while they are being tested and discovered. However, Kitcher's lack of explicit rules doesn't mean that a secular humanist isn't bound to certain decisions when faced with a moral dilemma. The secular humanist is consistently concerned with the balance between community life and selfish tendencies. Ethically, secular humanists are bound to making the most rational decision they see fit as they are morally obligated to progressing the discovery of ethical truth. So, for example, when it comes to Peter Singer's famous dilemma of saving the drowning child<sup>2</sup>, the secular humanist is morally bound to their best judgment at the time being. One person may act only if the cost of saving the child doesn't make them late to work, and another person may act even if the child is on the other side of the world. Both actions are ethical under the religion of secular humanism since the precise ethical truth of charity has yet to be established historically, and both decisions are contributing towards this discovery through more trial and error. However, once this ethical discovery is established, it will transcend all ethical decisions for future secular humanists.

However, this doesn't mean all ethical decisions are up for trial and error discovery. Kitcher does mention obvious moral wrongs that our species has discovered historically, such as slavery (Kitcher 2015, 40). One could convert the ethical discovery that slavery is wrong to a colloquial religious doctrine such as, "You shall not hold slaves". So, one secular humanist religious practice is to uphold equality in the elimination of slavery. In all, the secular humanist's

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Singer's moral dilemma is used in his contemplation on the level of obliged charity. In the dilemma, you are walking on your way to work when you come across a child who is drowning in a nearby duck pond. Questions are raised on what qualifies you as morally obliged to save the child as the situation's stakes change: you are in your best work clothes, there are other people around who could also save the child, you risk getting your bike stolen, your success in saving the child is uncertain, and in the final case, the child is actually on the other side of the world (Singer 1972, 231-233).

religion consists of the practices that yield their best contribution to the progress of ethical truth. Unless of course the ethical truth has already been discovered, which then the religion follows these truths.

### Considering a Non-Objective Atheist Religion

So far, I've looked at two atheist religions that still hold to an objective ethical code of conduct. One might consider the idea that an atheist believer could hold no religion if they don't hold to any particular set of practices. Maybe all of their ethical decisions are completely random. However, this very randomness would then be considered the moral code, the religion. Take for example again Singer's drowning child. An atheist believer with the religion of randomness still has an answer for how they ought to make the decision. They ought to make the decision randomly. Maybe they make their decision by flipping a coin, or maybe they make the decision by pure whim. Regardless, the unpredictability of practice doesn't entail that the practice doesn't exist. The one who claims no consistency to ethical practice still has practices. This religion of randomness is simply based on a capricious transcendence rather than a constant one.

Altogether, it might be easier for us to shape a dichotomy surrounding the responses to the question on existence of god. 'Yes' and 'no' are the go-to responses to questioning in general. In reality though, we have seen that responses need not be so polarizing. I have established the range of colorful religious beliefs that exist within the white light of God, 'the-', transcendence in general. Atheism, in short, is just another version of theism that contains a variety of religions within itself too.

## *Agnosticism*

However, I have yet to mention a common religious proposition made by many, one that does exist outside of this spectrum. When I explained the input/output ‘yes’ or ‘no’ response that your significant other might give, I seemed to have left out the answer many of us would give in this high pressure, uncomfortable situation. What answer do we give when we want to avoid confrontation? When we are scared of being wrong? When we can’t make up our mind? When we want to stop the annoying little kid on the ‘why?’ question spree?

There seems to be a third response to the question on transcendence, one that I conveniently left for considering until now. This is the infamous ‘I don’t know’. The name for those that claim no religious belief, no position on any kind of transcendence is that of the agnostic.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, agnostics believe that God is either unknown or unknowable (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “agnostic, *n.1*”). However, there is a significant difference between these two terms, and an examination of definitions will be helpful yet again. ‘Unknown’ is an adjective describing something that has yet to be established as fact (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “unknown, *adj.1*”), whereas ‘unknowable’ describes something that is beyond understanding entirely (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “unknowable, *adj.*”). The biggest difference between these two words is in their relation to time. Something that is ‘unknown’ marks something not understood *in the present moment*, but it neither says nor implies anything about the status of future knowledge. ‘Unknowable’ on the other hand refers to a *permanent* status of knowledge. Stating something as ‘unknowable’ is much bolder than stating

something is merely ‘unknown’. It claims a knowledge status that will exist through time, rather than one that is subject to change.

So really, there are two different versions of agnosticism. The first version of agnosticism claims a god is not known period. It speaks of knowledge status that doesn’t currently exist, though it leaves possibility for knowledge in the future. Knowledge on God is up for grabs, it just currently lacks evidence. For this reason, I will call this version of agnosticism, ‘undetermined agnosticism’. Definite knowledge of god is currently unknown, and hence, undetermined. However, the ‘unknowable’ version of agnosticism claims that knowledge on God doesn’t exist now, nor will it ever exist. For this reason, I will be calling this version of agnosticism ‘determined agnosticism’, as it seems to be much more certain of its knowledge status being permanently obscure. This determined agnosticism is the one that my paper will be primarily concerned with. It claims to be certain of its uncertainty, and this paradox is the one I aim to explore.

Before I jump into the paradox of this claim though, let’s take a step back. I skipped from talking about theisms to gnosticisms. ‘The-’ isn’t even in the term agnosticism. The base is actually ‘gnosis’ which is from the Greek ‘γνῶσις’ meaning simply ‘investigation’ or ‘knowledge’ in general (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “gnosis, *n.*”). Add the negating ‘a-’ prefix, and we get ‘agnosis’ or ‘lack of knowledge’. But... not known what? From an etymological perspective, this proposition makes no knowledge claim on God whatsoever; it is more of a skepticism of knowledge in general. Using our etymological tools, a more specific terminology can be formed to represent the proposition of having no knowledge on God.

Properly, this proposition ought to be called ‘agnostheism’<sup>3</sup>. We have the ‘a-’, signifying the lack of, ‘gnosis’ meaning knowledge, on God ‘the-’, summed up with the ‘-ism’ to signify an action forming belief. Agnostheism. Combining this new word with the specific attention now to the unknowable *determined* version of agnosticism, it is established that I am specifically examining *determined agnostheism*, the proposition that the existence of God is unknowable.

So, at first it seems agnosticism isn’t a religious decision at all. When people propose agnosticism to the religious question, they are really saying they don’t know anything. However, we know what they really mean is something more like agnostheism if we are talking on the religious spectrum. But the specifications don’t stop there. There are two different forms of this agnostheism: determined and undetermined. Undetermined agnostheism says knowledge on God is unknown, while determined agnostheism says knowledge on God is unknowable. I am particularly concerned with the determined type of agnostheism, the permanent one that exists for all time. In what lies next, I will evaluate the logical coherency and actual existence of this proposition as a religious belief in order to eventually argue why nobody actually can nor should use this proposition as a response to the God Question.

### **Levels of Existence**

The metaphysical definitions have been spelled out. Determined agnostheism has been specified.

With premises clear, it is time to evaluate the existence of agnosticism on two different levels: logically as a proposition and actually as a belief. I will begin by acknowledging the logical

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<sup>3</sup> It should also be noted that there already do exist positions like ‘agnostic theism’ or ‘agnostic atheism’ which claim to hold the beliefs of theism or atheism, denying true knowledge on these beliefs. In my new terminology, I have combined the two separated words into one in order to mean the lack of knowledge, specifically on God.



existence of the proposition itself, but I will uncover its contradiction as it attempts to become a belief.

### *Logical Existence*

Even though the basic term ‘agnosticism’ seems to be the wrong word for the unknowability of God, it is obvious that its existence as a proposition can’t be denied purely from a semantic standpoint. This would be a rather simplistic proof. To acknowledge a logical existence of agnosticism, one has to simply understand what I mean by its definition and be able to talk about it. So, in this paper, I mean logical existence to be mental conceivability and effectively communicative. Therefore, I will be showing that agnosticism, as its specific version determined agnostheism, is understandable and can be used in effective communication.

Thus far, due to the fact that I have been building up to its definition for the length of this paper, I would hope that agnosticism logically exists. I hope that I have not been speaking gibberish to my readers. Though, if it still remains obscure, I will admit that it is my own fault, not the lack of coherency of the idea itself. Nonetheless, a review is warranted.

To be clear, determined agnostheism helps point out more specifically what I aim to discuss when referring to agnosticism. Determined agnostheism is the proposition that knowledge on God is unknowable. This seems to be mentally conceivable, since I can understand it. It’s not like trying to imagine a square circle, or an odd number two. These are two ideas I can’t wrap my brain around no matter how hard I try. However, I can conceive of knowledge on God never being grasped. I can understand this infinite unknowability.

The proposition is effectively communicative as well. It's not like the sentence, "to I yellow the monkey the feed banana". This sentence, or any idea that represents this sentence, makes no sense. It is linguistic gibberish. However, there is semantical meaning behind the proposition that 'knowledge on god is unknowable'. Therefore, determined agnostheism logically exists, and so does agnosticism when it's picking out this proposition.

Unfortunately for agnosticism, that's as far as its definitive existence goes. It exists in the dry land of mental conceivability and linguistic discourse, but when it tries to dip its toe into the ocean of actuality, it begins to sink.

### *Actual Existence*

We can conceive of agnosticism, we can talk about agnosticism, so it is a logically existent proposition. However, when one tries to apply this proposition how it is meant to be applied, as a belief or temporary doubt, it becomes a contradiction. By actual existence, I mean its existence as a belief or doubt that people can actually hold. To start exploring, I'll make the following assumption:

1. If agnosticism actually exists, it is a belief or a doubt.

Let's flesh this out. What makes this the case? Why can't it just remain as a logical proposition? Who says that the religious question is one that people must deliberate upon? After all, it seems as though there are plenty of logical propositions that don't require deliberation, and thus can remain permanently unknowable. Take the banana case again. I could easily be a

determined bananagnostic. If I never encountered a situation where a banana was called into context, I would never have to decide on the nature of bananas. If I never had to decide on the bananas, I would never have to believe or doubt that bananas are yellow. The proposition that bananas are yellow may exist out there. I can entertain the thought. But I can contently remain a determined bananagnostic. I would only have to believe that bananas are yellow or doubt/deliberate that bananas are yellow if I encountered one. The color of bananas can remain unknowable to me. It's a truth I need not pursue.

Now, here's where the religious component comes into play. Agnosticism is not like any other proposition. Agnosticism is a religious proposition on God, on a transcendence, that implies transcending, ethical actions, moral actions that we, as humans, can't avoid. Humans are social animals. When Korsgaard talks of ethical standards she notes how we are not only making obligatory claims on ourselves, but also on one another (Korsgaard 1996, 8). *Interaction* between humans is a part of being a human. This component of transcendent, normative moral decision making is uniquely anthropomorphic. The concern for applying transcending actions to third parties (rather than just concern for personal or dyadic decisions), and even the leniency to conformity exists among other primates, but only humans use these universally or consistently (Burkhart, Brügger, and Van Schaik 2018). It is a part of our human nature to participate in moral deliberation, and so, a part of our human nature to have beliefs on God, on a transcendence.

It could be argued that not all humans are capable of moral decisions. Babies are a good example. They are too young to have decided on an ethical code to follow. The mentally handicapped are also another good example showing that the human condition doesn't necessarily have a moral framework. I would be a fool to suggest that because babies and the

mentally handicapped don't have moral codes they aren't human. That is not what I am suggesting. However, in their current state, they are not capable of moral deliberation, and therefore are in a sense, true determined agnostheists<sup>4</sup>. Notice though that neither the baby nor the mentally handicapped would be having this discussion to begin with. Them claiming agnosticism as a belief or doubt is not a concern, so they are exempt.

So, thus far I have shown that since agnosticism, as determined agnostheism, is a religious proposition, it must be decided upon. It need not be decided upon immediately, it can be doubted temporarily, but eventually moral decisions are inevitable for us as humans. Therefore, propositions on transcendence can't be unknowable since we can't permanently avoid moral situations, so they must either be believed, or temporarily doubted. Now that I have established the tricky religious component, I can work with the simpler parts:

## 2. Agnosticism is not a belief.

Agnosticism wants to be thought of as a belief. It's what some people claim, and therefore must act on and then believe in when they are posed the religious question. It even has the action forming "-ism" that makes it seem like a belief. But remember, a belief entails action. Agnosticism, if a religious belief, would specifically have religious actions. Moral actions. However, there is no room for moral action in the agnostic position. It doesn't make any decisions on transcendence. In fact, it says there will never be any decision made regarding

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<sup>4</sup> One could argue that babies are considered undetermined agnostheists since they are only undecided for the time being. Babies eventually develop a moral awareness, whereas the mentally handicapped never do. I argue against this objection since babies *in their current state* are determined agnostheists. A baby's identity, so long as they are still a baby, always lacks the capacity to morally decide. This is distinctly different from your typical undetermined agnostheist who is just currently in the deliberation process.

transcendence. If there is a complete absence of decision making, complete absence of action, there is no belief. So, agnosticism can't be a belief.

3. Agnosticism is not a doubt.

But now let's evaluate agnosticism as a doubt. If it were a doubt, there would have to be something to be deliberated, something to be doubted in the first place. But what is the agnostic deliberating? Nothing. The agnostic's claim is that there is nothing to deliberate, because a decision can never be reached. So, it seems agnosticism is neither a belief nor a doubt. It is nothing more than a logical proposition.

4. Agnosticism is not a belief nor a doubt (2 & 3).

5. Agnosticism does not actually exist (1, 4 Modus Tollens).

In all, agnosticism can't exist in our actual world, outside of its propositional, logical arena. Being a proposition on transcendence, agnosticism as determined agnostheism must be either believed or doubted for us as human beings. When it tries to be a belief, it fails. When it tries to be a doubt, it fails as well. It is a determined breed of doubt that could only exist for those who can't participate in the discussion in the first place.

## Harmful Effects

Now I turn to the purpose of this paper. Thus far I have defined belief, doubt, and religion in my own terms. Under the more specified term ‘determined agnostheism’, I have acknowledged agnosticism as a logically conceivable proposition in its statement that God is unknowable, but I have proven it cannot be proposed as a religious belief. Yet, despite this, philosophers and laymen continue to propose it as their answer to the religious question. I will now show the significance of agnosticism’s impossibility, giving reasons for why it should be eliminated from religious discourse. I will begin with the particular role of the philosopher in the use of agnosticism, as he/she has a crucial role to play in the pursuit of truth. I will then examine the negative practical, psychological and social effects general skepticism and religious skepticism (through determined agnostheism) have on the average human being.

### *The Philosopher*

Philosophy is literally the love of wisdom, ‘philo’ meaning ‘love’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “philo-, *comb. form*”), and ‘sophia’ meaning ‘wisdom’ or ‘knowledge’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “sophia, *n.*”). When it comes to achieving this knowledge, I draw from Charles Peirce’s pragmatism. The discovery of all knowledge includes: (1) acceptance of error, (2) a continuous desire to know, and (3) belief in the reality of knowledge (Peirce 1955, 4). In light of all of this, the philosopher, as a lover of knowledge, has a unique role to play. First, the philosopher’s logic is vital in the sound foundation of truth itself. The philosopher should make his/her own theories as error free as possible for the sake of the discovery of truth. However, the

philosopher can't only be concerned with the truth of the knowledge he/she is in love with. The philosopher has a corresponding duty to make his/her own path clear and consistent, so all others can follow in their wise footsteps. In all, the philosopher is a leader to truth in all knowledge. As a leader, the philosopher must be sure of the path they are on both for knowledge's own sake, and for the sake of those who will follow their example in the pursuit of knowledge.

Now, agnosticism as we are speaking of it, isn't just talking about knowledge in general. When I have been speaking of agnosticism, I have meant determined agnostheism, which makes a claim specifically on religious knowledge. So, let's put this theory on knowledge into the religious context. According to the third criterion of Peirce's pragmatism, there is true religious knowledge, but the first criterion states that there is also false religious knowledge. The second criterion relates between the existence of true religious knowledge and its reconciliation with our human error. The only way to find the correct religious knowledge is to continue to search, to follow our innate desires to know. The philosopher then must make his/her own religious theories clear so that true religious knowledge can be discovered, and so that all others can partake in this discovery as well.

However, it has been shown that when held by the philosopher, agnosticism obscures this road to religious knowledge, creating a darkened alley rather than a sunlit path to truth. Bertrand Russell is a creator of one of these alleys. Russell is arguably one of the most famous atheist philosophers of the modern era. However, most of Russell's knowledge claims on God seem to make him more of an agnostic, specifically a determined agnostheist, saying things like, "I do not pretend to be able to prove that there is no God" (Russell 1957, 50). Initially, this may seem to be flagging the unknowability of God, but it could also mean Russell doesn't see his knowledge claims, such as atheism, as needing to match up with absolute proof. In fact, claiming

complete, absolute knowledge on any standard would be rather bold. So, Russell is just “retreating to agnosticism” (Garra 2018, 360) for the sake of humbleness in knowledge, relying on conceptions of probability rather than absolutes like many modern fallibilistic philosophers. Really, we can still consider him an atheist, just one of mere probability.

Yet, he then puts knowledge claims on God and immortality with knowledge claims on science when he says, “The argument is only one of probability, but it is as strong as those upon which most scientific conclusions are based” (Russell 1957, 51). The argument Russell is referring to is the one against immortality, which corresponds with his ideas against an immaterial, transcending soul. So here it seems that Russell has as much knowledge of a transcendence not existing as he does about all other scientific knowledge. In other words, Russell is as much of an atheist about God as he is about science in general. This would seem to imply a Hume-like denial of causation in the realm of science. But Russell isn’t an atheist about science at all. In fact, he is an ardent defender of science even from a moral standpoint. He claims no moral standard (much like the religion of randomness I explored previously) but says that ethical desire can be taught and practically used, using scientific discovery (Russell 1957, 62).

In conclusion, we see Russell, a famous atheist philosopher, relying on agnosticism to escape complete proof on no God, while simultaneously putting these kinds of religious, transcending knowledge claims with absolute knowledge claims on science (Garra 2018, 363). This provides a perfect example of how even philosophers are confused by agnosticism. Russell, avoiding error by not claiming a proof of no God, denies his philosophical duty of clear and consistent truth. However, his other philosophical duty is also put in danger. Russell’s leading example of retreating to agnosticism in cases of uncertainty reinforces the common association



of atheism and agnosticism which I have already shown is incorrect since atheism is still a religious belief and agnosticism is pure absence of belief. In turn, he sets the wrong example for the common man to follow. Therefore, agnosticism is harmful to the philosopher and the philosophical world's love of knowledge in its avoidance rather than (1) acceptance of error and for its lack of (3) belief in the reality of religious knowledge in general, which then ends up destroying (2) the continuous desire to know for the common man.

### *The Common Man*

I have shown how the philosopher's use of agnosticism is especially harmful due to the leadership role philosophy has in the pursuit and preservation of all knowledge. However, there is a reason this leadership role is so important—it leads the common man. So far, I have only situated the agnostic in the determined agnostheist terminology, but the common agnostic wouldn't normally categorize himself as a determined agnostheist. So why does the common agnostic label himself this way?

For starters, many people feel they are playing it safe when it comes to agnosticism. As I have talked about before, the common man sees religious belief existing on the polarizing yes/no scale between atheism and theism. In the social context, atheism tends to have a negative, depressing, dark connotation, where theism is sometimes shove-down-your throat, happy-go-lucky, false hope. Agnosticism is somewhere in the middle. By being an agnostic in the social and psychological context, I can play it safe between the two extremes. I can be a value pluralist, enjoy the best of both of both worlds mentally, and not offend anyone in the process. I have proven this view is actually nonexistent, but why does it matter if the agnostic continues to label

himself as an agnostic? Now I can examine the practical, psychological and social harms of genuine agnosticism, that is skepticism in general, that are only heightened when put on the level of religious belief.

### A Pragmatic Evaluation

The pragmatic downfalls for the common agnostic go back to the beginnings of my discussion on belief and doubt. To review, doubt is suspension in action toward a particular idea. Now, this doubt is practiced for the continued thought and examination of an idea before a commitment to it is made, and an action is performed. While it is true that some skepticism is valuable because of its calls for deeper thought and questioning, too much doubt can be extremely impractical from a time standpoint. It makes for much slower decision making, and hence much slower action. One cannot suspend action toward every decision forever, and even slowing down decision making in every action is simply not feasible in mundane human life. Imagine never deciding, never believing that it is your turn to go at a four-way stop sign. That's going to make you pretty late to work.

### A Psychological Evaluation

To put this impracticality of time in psychological terms, too much doubt, or too long of suspension from action when the action is actually inevitable, is very mentally stressful. Let's go back to the banana scenario. Imagine, while peeling the banana to feed to the snarling baboon, inspecting its peel again and again for streaks of green or spots of brown, just to make sure it's

still a yellow banana. Not only would this be time consuming to the point where the banana's effectiveness in calming the monkey may be moot, but it will also create even more stress for you in an already high-stress situation. Is that a brown spot? Nope, just a speck of dirt. Is that a bit of green or is that just the reflection from the canopy of leaves overhead? And so, the circle of doubt goes until your dead either from the baboon or pure mental exhaustion.

### A Social Evaluation

Applying this indecision of the agnostic to a social level, whether it be in personal relationships or politics, is damaging as well. Nobody can argue that the friend who won't decide on anything is not extremely annoying. While at first it may feel empowering to make all the decisions, foster all the beliefs, this honeymoon phase will begin to wear off when one realizes it's not much of a relationship anymore, but rather a commanding dictatorship. Or maybe the indecisive agnostic refrains from decision making but doesn't refrain from comments on yours. On the public level, it is important to be wary of a person who claims no position on a particular topic. Not staking a position on a topic naturally weakens modes for identity in group situations. For example, the political candidate who stakes no claim on the issue of abortion won't gain supporters from the pro-life or the pro-choice movement. Not only that, but the indecisive abortion candidate now doesn't have any word to hold to either. Regardless of the lack of claim on the abortion position, a decision (or lack of decision) will be made on abortion if that candidate is elected, and now any action can be tolerated once the candidate is in office since he/she has no word to hold to. In all, too much doubt in social decisions allows for weaknesses and inconsistencies that damage relationships on both the personal and public level.

## Input Determined Agnostheism

So, the common man has reasons to avoid agnosticism in general. It is temporally impractical, psychologically taxing, socially annoying and even untrustworthy. However, these reasons thus far have been talking about the negative effects of doubt in general. My paper is primarily concerned with the sustained, religious doubt in the form of determined agnostheism. So, let's put these pragmatic impracticalities in the determined agnostheist's context.

These negative effects of doubt put onto the religious stage simply multiply the impracticality, the anxiety, and the inconsistency. Suspending action on what one's transcending, moral actions are makes for a kind of meta-indecision. It entails doubting not only what one is doing in the moment, but also what one has done or will do. When I doubt a moral decision, the time wasted trying to make the decision will only be more detrimental. I can't sit there and wonder if I should save the drowning child— if I don't make up my mind quickly, he is surely going to drown. I have only added pressure to the initial psychological anxieties too, worrying about accuracy even more. This isn't bananas anymore. This is possible existence of a transcendence that permeates my entire worldview, and maybe even post-worldview. The social inconsistencies will only have greater holes. Good healthy, relationships are founded on not just similar recreational likings, but similar beliefs on goals that transcend throughout our lives where each person challenges the other in striving for this goal. If one person lacks a clear practice for achieving this ultimate goal, the relationship stagnates and lacks purpose, and which can be seen in both personal and public relations.

This is not the case from a merely theoretical perspective either. According to a psychological study on undergraduate students in the Northeastern United States, “spiritual intelligence”, or frequent contemplation on questions of existence, personal meaning, and transcendence, is positively correlated with positive mental health (Giannone and Kaplin 2017). In the study, different questions were posed to the students to first rate them on the Spiritual Intelligence Self-Report Inventory Scale (King and DeCicco 2009). These levels of spiritual intelligence were then compared with each student’s level of depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. Results demonstrated a higher level of spiritual intelligence correlated with a lower level of mental health problems. While spiritual intelligence may not be directly correlated with agnosticism, it does at least imply an entertainment of religious thoughts, ones that a determined agnostheist would not have. Being a determined agnostheist and henceforth abstaining from religious discussions would only lead to lower spiritual intelligence and therefore put one at greater risk for mental health problems linked to doubt. Altogether, there is both theoretical and scientific evidence that points the common man away from wanting to label himself as any kind of agnostic, let alone a determined agnostheist, especially from the standpoint of his own mental well-being.

### Doubting Doubt

At first glance, my argument may seem a little outrageous. Certainly, I can’t be trying to say all doubt is harmful. After all, my discipline, philosophy, is arguably founded on doubt and skepticism. Questioning underlying assumptions, searching for alternative arguments, and playing the devil’s advocate all involve species of doubt. One could go even further with my

argument pertaining to specifically religious doubt to say that specifically *because* religious beliefs exist through time, *because* they hold more weight in both their positive and negative effects, they should be allowed more time for speculation before action is taking. However, I am not arguing for suspension of doubt entirely. I am not saying that all decisions must be made in the nick of time in order to avoid these harmful effects, and certainly not religious decisions. My argument against doubt in general was only that *too much* is harmful, and my argument against the effects of religious doubt is defined differently from the beginning. A healthy, *undetermined* agnostheism, is not what my argument is against. I am specifically dealing with the breed of *determined* agnostheism. This statement 'God is unknowable', through time, is particularly paralyzing in its effects and hence damaging in the ways I have previously described.

In all, this section exposes how too much doubt can be overwhelming. For practical purposes of time, for building mental anxieties, and fostering virtuous relationships, agnosticism, even without the religious component, can be overwhelming. It has also been demonstrated how the negative effects of doubt are only heightened under the determined agnostheistic lens as it casts a permanent feeling of anxiety and inconsistency over decisions that transcend past, present, and future. This is precisely why I am arguing for the nonexistence of agnosticism. By denying this proposition as an actual religious belief, philosophers can lead the common man away from the crippling effects of permanent religious indecision to properly foster the pursuit of religious truth.

## Conclusion

You are not an agnostic. You, and every other person has a religious belief. Maybe you have been avoiding it. Maybe you haven't fleshed it out completely. Maybe you aren't aware of exactly what your religious beliefs oblige you to do. Maybe that's a little overwhelming, and maybe it should be. "What morality commands, obliges, or recommends is *hard*" (Korsgaard 1996, 8). Nonetheless, you are a moral agent, and though you may have tried to escape from the transcending, ethical, God Question, your moral actions have spoken louder than your religious words: agnostic, atheist, maltheist, whatever they may be.

But who says religious ignorance would be bliss anyway? So, you have a few duties as a moral agent. A duty to be aware of what your actions say about what you truly believe. A duty to stand up for your beliefs, the justifications for your actions. A duty to seek the truth, and to never give up on the search. But the truth is not unknowable, and the search is not unending. For "You will know the truth. And the truth will set you free." (John 8:32). So, you have a duty to set yourself free, free from a paralyzing, permeating, transcendent doubt. I wouldn't really call that bliss anyway.

If belief entails action, action entails belief, doubt entails no action, and agnosticism must be either a belief or a doubt, agnosticism, under the new term 'determined agnostheism', can't be an actual religious belief. The white spectrum of theisms are where religious beliefs exist, including even that of atheism. These facts about religious belief and agnosticism are necessary to acknowledge in order to motivate philosophers and the common man to participate in religious dialogue and avoid the harmful effects of perpetual religious doubt.

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