

## Apisteology: A Proposal for the Study of Nonbelief

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### **Abstract**

Belief has been extensively (although not always profitably) researched, but nonbelief has not.. This essay proposes to change this attitude by introducing and promoting the concept of apisteology (*a-pistis-logos*) or the study of nonbelief. Nonbelief has not only been a neglected subject but has been generally assumed to apply to religion primarily or exclusively. Taking a much broader view of nonbelief as absence, abstention, or rejection of truth-claims, confidence, and commitment on any potential matter (in the contemporary world, for example, climate change, vaccine efficacy, the Holocaust, or mainstream news media), the essay begins to conceive the form and mission of apisteology and surveys what four disciplines—philosophy, psychology, sociology, and anthropology—can contribute to it as an independent interdisciplinary field of inquiry.

**Key words:** agnotology, apisteology, belief, knowledge, nonbelief

Ignorance is not simply an innocent or default lack of knowledge; often it is a product—sometimes a quite deliberate and cynical product—of processes and purveyors of ignorance. Such is the insight of practitioners in the emerging field of agnotology, the study of ignorance or, more politely and accurately, not-knowing (*a-gnosis-logos*). A similar revolution needs to occur in the area of belief, where believing has been relatively systematically studied (but not, I will argue shortly, in the manner in which it should be) but not-believing has not. Nonbelief has conventionally been regarded as a diminishingly minority phenomenon (i.e., most people believe but a few do not), as a residual or parasitic category (i.e., nonbelief is merely a default or uninformed lack of belief), or worst as a morally reprehensible contrarian position (i.e., nonbelievers stubbornly refuse to believe, subject to correction and punishment, sometimes eternal).

In response to this neglect, and on the model of agnotology, this essay proposes a dedicated study of nonbelief or *apisteology* (*a-pistis-logos*), which could also be spelled “apistiology” but not “apistology,” as this term sometimes refers to the study of bees (as in, for instance, an apiary as a place to keep bees). The inspiration for the term comes from theologian Richard Niebuhr’s passing reference to “pistology” or a “pistological argument” (1989: 63-4), derived from the Greek and biblical word πίστη (*pistis*), translated variously as belief, faith, conviction, trust, loyalty, or credit. Niebuhr apparently did not imagine an *a*-pistology or *a*-pistological argument, nor has anyone else (as of October 2022, the words “apisteology” and “apistiology” get exactly zero hits on a Google search, and “apistology” resulted in about eight references, including those about bees).

This essay, then, is an introduction to and appeal for a new field of apisteology, the non-normative (that is, not arguing about which beliefs are true) study of not-believing. It is programmatic in nature, only indicating what such a field could and should be and what it promises to accomplish; in a few thousand words, it cannot hope to carry out the project of unpacking nonbelief. Nonetheless, any future endeavor of apisteology begins with a set of principles, including the following:

1. Nonbelief is a valid, indeed urgent, subject of study in its own right; it is not just a derivative or absence of belief.
2. The study of nonbelief requires a proper understanding of belief, which is still largely lacking in the academy.
3. Nonbelief, like belief, is often if not always a social construction.
4. Nonbelief, like belief, is neither always praiseworthy nor blameworthy.
5. For every nonbelief there is one or more opposite (if not equal) beliefs, and vice versa.
6. The study of nonbelief must be a robust multidisciplinary undertaking.
7. It is essential to understand, despite the monopoly on the term, that *nonbelief is not exclusively or even especially about religion* (as religion is not exclusively or especially about belief).

## **Conceiving belief and nonbelief**

Although we dismiss the contention that nonbelief is entirely parasitic on belief, understanding nonbelief does presuppose understanding belief. Belief is a concept much investigated and much contested in various disciplines. In philosophy, a familiar and oft-quoted definition places it as a super-category or genus, of which knowledge is a sub-category or species, to wit, knowledge is justified true belief. The implication if not entailment is that a belief is any proposition that takes the form “*x* exists” or “*x* has quality *y*.” As I have argued over the years, this is insufficient and mostly false logically and chronologically. Chronologically, it is not the case the people typically have a belief, verify it, and then arrive at knowledge (the English language does not permit us to say “a knowledge”). For instance, scientists do not start with a belief and then establish its truth and justification; rather, they start with a *hypothesis* and then test it, presuming the “null hypothesis” or the falseness of the hypothesis (no scientist in her right mind “believes” a hypothesis). From another angle, religious believers do not start with a belief which they submit to the glare of evidence; rather, they tend to shield their presumed-true belief from evidence and retain it despite lack of evidence or argument or in the face of disconfirming evidence

and argument. As an illustration, Pastor Jeff LaRuffa appeared in the recent documentary “Questioning Darwin” to testify that if the Bible said that two plus two equals five, “I would believe it, accept it as true” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ysecinv367w>). Logically, the idea that belief contains a subset of justified and true propositions means that it also contains subsets of unjustified and true, justified and untrue, and unjustified and untrue propositions, which few champions of belief would like to admit.

For the moment, we can build on the notion that a belief is a proposition or truth-claim (though not a precursor to knowledge). A belief is not the same thing as a value; a value is something that a person approves/disapproves or desires/avoids. Sometimes a value wears the grammar of belief, as in “I believe in democracy” or “I don’t believe in same-sex marriage,” but what this conveys is “I approve of democracy” or “I disapprove of same-sex marriage,” not a dispute about whether democracy or same-sex marriage *exists* (which obviously does) or is *true* (which is a nonsense statement).

This takes us to a crucial point that is captured in the translation of *pistis*, the semantic range of which covers belief but also faith, loyalty, trust, and credit (note that the Latin *credo*, “I believe,” is related to both “creed” and “credit”). What this reveals is that the truth aspect of belief is but one dimension of its semantic range, in Greek and in English. We also use “belief” to refer to cases of trust or confidence (“I believe my friend will return my borrowed car”) and of commitment (“I believe in America”). Neither of these usages contests the existence of my friend, my car, or America. The situation becomes clearer when we consider religious belief: Christians may and ideally do “believe in” their god in all three of these senses, but they may “believe in” Satan in only the first sense, not trusting him (or they must trust him to do evil) and certainly not committing to him. Significantly, this is another way in which belief and knowledge differ intrinsically; knowledge constitutes a truth-claim but rarely if ever trust or commitment (i.e., one says, “I know that atoms exist,” but no one says, “I trust atoms” or “I am committed to atoms”).

All of this is one reason why the current discourse on nonbelief is so anemic: it treats belief only in its propositional or truth-claim variety. Another reason is that analysis of (non)belief predominantly occurs in the domain of religion, as if religion is the only subject on which people have beliefs—and consequently reject beliefs. This is most certainly not the case; people can and do have beliefs (in the propositional sense, as well as the other senses) on any subject whatsoever. Yet, when scholars talk about belief and nonbelief, they typically mean *religious* belief or nonbelief.

A prime example is the effort by a coterie of scholars and activists to promote “unbelief” as an umbrella term for concepts like atheism, secularism, and irreligion (see Eller 2021). Gordon Stein, writing in *The Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, characterized it as “not holding orthodox beliefs or traditional opinions—on religious matters, in our context,” among which he subsumed “heresy, blasphemy, rejection of belief, atheism, agnosticism, humanism, and rationalism” (1985: xv). Nickolas Conrad, a more recent advocate of the approach, echoes this sentiment in his definition of unbelief as “the position of not holding orthodox beliefs or traditional opinions—on religious matters—and the rejection of authority and norms concerning spiritual practices” (2018: 2). But not only does this rule out nonbelief in every subject-area except religion; it also grants nonbelief status to unorthodox beliefs, heresies, and nontraditional opinions, *which are most assuredly beliefs too*.

So apisteology examines nonbelief in all domains, not only religion, and in all three of its interrelated ranges, and it also recognizes that belief and nonbelief exist in relationship and often if not always in constellations of beliefs and nonbeliefs. That is, a person who believes in the Christian god does not believe (at least coherently) in any other gods; likewise, a person who believes the propaganda spewing from sources like Fox News does not believe (i.e., trust, commit to, accept truth from) the mainstream media, and those who disbelieve in the safety and efficacy of vaccines believe instead the debunked claims linking vaccines to autism or to some cabal of liberal conspirators.

### **Previous approaches to nonbelief: Models to emulate or avoid**

With this very preliminary groundwork in place, we can begin to envision what apisteology might look like and what it might aim to achieve. Fortunately, there are some pre-existing models through which

to think about this future field. The first, already mentioned, is agnotology. Agnotology is a relatively new specialty, invented to fill a gap due to ignoring ignorance as a legitimate research topic. Philosophy has long appreciated knowledge as a serious topic and problem, which epistemology addresses; ignorance, in contrast, while a problem, was not an independent subject but merely the absence of knowledge: acquire knowledge, and ignorance disappears. However, in 1854 James Ferrier realized that ignorance was not an trivial residual category, urging the study of ignorance in a field of “agnoiology.” The call was not heeded for more than a century, when Michael Smithson (1984) finally offered an analysis of ignorance, which he insisted we should treat as a complicated social construct resulting from a plethora of guiltless and not-so-guiltless practices and taking diverse forms, such as distortion, incompleteness, absence, vagueness, ambiguity, and more.

It was Proctor and Schiebinger’s 2008 volume *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance* that really launched the stand-alone field of ignorance studies. Explaining that ignorance is often more than a void of knowledge, Proctor proposed that we consider it as alternatively or simultaneously a “resource,” a “lost realm’ (as in that which is forgotten, suppressed, or erased) and a “deliberately engineered and *strategic ploy* (or active construct)” composed of a congeries of forces and practices like “secrecy, stupidity, apathy, censorship, disinformation, faith, and forgetfulness” (2008: 2-3). Interestingly but not surprisingly, most of the chapters in the volume explored ignorance practices in business and industry, but these strategies and ploys are common in politics, religion, and every walk of life (see Eller 2020a, 2020b).

Apisteology can obviously take direction from agnotology. Both are novel fields resulting from the discovery of an overlooked problem, in fact the same kind of problem—the misrepresentation of a distinct issue and process (ignorance, nonbelief) as nothing more than the absence of something positive (knowledge, belief). Indeed, the two initiatives are even more closely allied, as many people who reject a belief assess the belief as ignorance (as nonfactual and non-knowledge)—and many believers judge the nonbeliever as ignorant and vice versa—while fomenting false beliefs and thus encouraging nonbelief in true facts and knowledge is one of the key tactics of ignorance-making.

Another model for apisteology is the current “Understanding Unbelief” project at the University of Kent, which unites psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists in “a major research program aiming to advance the scientific understanding of atheism and other forms of so-called ‘unbelief’ around the world. Its central research questions concern the nature and diversity of ‘unbelief’” (<https://research.kent.ac.uk/understandingunbelief>). As promising as that sounds, the summary, as well as the list of research topics and the funding source (the Templeton Foundation) show that it continues to conceive of unbelief in strictly religious terms. It is thrilling to imagine a research institute at a major university with multi-million dollar funding exploring nonbelief apisteologically in its full glory

Coming from the other end of the spectrum, apisteology has much to learn from the Credition Research Project based at the University of Graz, Austria (<https://credition.uni-graz.at/de>). The first step in its plan is to substitute the overburdened term “belief” with the neutral term “credition,” establishing it as a topic on par with perception, emotion, cognition, and other social-psychological phenomena. The concept of credition reorients us to belief as a mental and social process, toward considering “what happens ‘while someone is believing’” rather than toward the argumentative “relationship between belief and knowledge” (Angel 2013: 536). The main product of the project so far, Angel et al.’s (2017) *Processes of Believing: The Acquisition, Maintenance, and Change in Creditions*, brings together scholars from such disparate perspectives as philosophy, theology, economics, and anthropology but especially neuroscience, highlighting the cognitivist and neuroscientific bias of the initiative (also evident in the 2022 special issue on credition in *Frontiers of Behavioral Neuroscience*). Hopefully the project will investigate more thoroughly the philosophical, historical, cultural, and political aspects of belief, setting a strong example for a kindred program on nonbelief.

## **An interdisciplinary research program for nonbelief**

In this main section of the essay, we will begin to picture just such a program and field, informed by contributions from many if not all disciplines working in concert. The section cannot pretend to be an exhaustive literature review of each discipline, and no doubt scholars in each specialty have thought of and will think of other ways to contribute. The point here is to identify what various disciplines can add to our understanding of nonbelief and how essential these differing perspectives are to the whole of apisteology.

The first thing to note about not-believing is its extraordinary diversity. Even on the restricted terrain of nonreligion and atheism, scholars have described numerous types of religious nonbelief. For instance, Norenzayan and Gervais discuss four “pathways” to irreligion (which they mistakenly equate to atheism), acknowledging rightly that “the same pathways that encourage religious beliefs, if altered or disrupted, yield disbelief instead” (2013: 20). Two of these pathways are individual/psychological, while the other two are social/cultural. In the former category are weaker or more circumspect tendencies to attribute mind or agency to the non-human world (i.e., a less “hyperactive” agency detection device) and stronger habits of reasoning and analysis; in the latter are the alleviation of “existential insecurities” that attract people to religion and overall lack of cultural support for belief in the form of fewer and less compelling “credibility enhancing displays” or CREDS” such as church attendance, ritual, and simple everyday encounters with religion (the colonization of the lifeworld by religion). Others like Silver and colleagues (2014) have proposed various typologies of religious nonbelief, in the case of Silver et al. namely academic atheists, activist atheists/agnostics, seeker agnostics, antitheists, nontheists, and ritual atheists. We can quibble about the number and labels of nonreligious types, but the activity of categorizing is surely a valid and necessary one.

Moving to a more inclusive position that is not preoccupied with religion, there are other more general ways in which not-believing may vary. To start, many people do not “believe in *x*” (in all three senses of truth, trust, and troth) because they *have never heard of x*, because the very idea of *x* is not part of their vocabulary and mental universe. No Westerner does or could “believe in” the Azande (African) god Mbori or the Warlpiri (Australian Aboriginal) notions of *jukurrpa* or *kuruwarri* who has not been exposed to those ideas, just as the Azande or Warlpiri did not and could not “believe in” the Christian god until Christians arrived bearing the belief.

Once a belief is available to individuals or a society, there are many ways in which and many reasons for which they might not believe it. Some beliefs, like Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny, are specifically for children, and adults normally outgrow them; we might say that there are culture- and age-appropriate nonbeliefs. Other beliefs are forgotten or discredited, such as the claim that the moon is made of cheese or that vampires exist. In the paradigmatic case, a belief is abandoned when disconfirming evidence is encountered, like the belief in “the ether” (as a medium for the propagation of light waves), in a flat earth, or, for atheists, in god(s).

Nonbelief, meanwhile, like belief is not always absolute. Individuals may inhabit a gray space of doubt or uncertainty, or they may straddle the fence in the common (mis)conception of agnosticism. Nonbelief may be temporary, an outcome of skepticism that is eventually satisfied, and it may precede or succeed belief (the believer ceases to believe, or the nonbeliever begins to believe).

Most curious and vexing, as we will discuss below, is nonbelief when the overwhelming bulk of evidence and experience suggests (if not proves) the veracity of the proposition. Despite everything we know, there are people who do not believe that the earth is round, that the Holocaust happened, that humans landed on the moon, that vaccines are safe and effective, *ad infinitum*, which amounts not only to disbelief but to *denial*. This most assuredly is a job for apisteology.

Proceeding from creating typologies and identifying particular issues of nonbelief, we first acknowledge the vital role that philosophy has to play in apisteology. Philosophy before and more than any other discipline has grappled with the problem of knowledge and truth; indeed it is fair to say that philosophy from Socrates to Descartes and on through Kant, Nietzsche, and Foucault arises from the question of what is true and what we know, arguing that we do not always know what we think we know (Socrates), that we should doubt or disbelieve what is not certain and beyond disbelief (Descartes), that

there are things we cannot know but should still believe (Kant), that truth is a set of shifting metaphors subordinate to will (Nietzsche), or that truth is an effect of historical “regimes of truth” (Foucault).

Philosophy can turn its considerable powers of analysis and critique toward the concept of nonbelief as brightly as it has toward belief; this must include all three territories of propositional correctness, confidence, and commitment. It needs to fully consider the relation between belief and knowledge, between knowledge and ignorance, and between ignorance/not-knowing and not-believing. This could and should include *doxa* or opinion and scrutiny of rationality and multiple rationalities. Going beyond the individual as an intrepid (non)knower and (non)believer, philosophy can recruit *social epistemology* or the study of how people construct and arrive at claims to know and believe/not-believe in the context of social relations and institutions; in short, the question is “truth [and belief/nonbelief] acquisition by groups, or collective agents” (Goldman and O’Connor 2021). Social epistemology raises related issues of the role of testimony, peer disagreement, collective knowledge and epistemic communities, judgment aggregation, group justification, and experts.

Philosophers have already introduced a number of productive concepts for apistology, many of which can be bundled under the heading of *epistemic practices* or the means and methods by which people make, assess, defend, and legitimize truth-claims. Among these is *epistemic trust*, that is, whom we trust for information to form and support our knowledge and beliefs and “the complex of cognitive mechanisms, emotional dispositions, inherited norms, reputational cues, we put at work while filtering the information we receive” (Origi 2012: 224). Obviously, a lack of epistemic trust (e.g. in scientists, politicians, academics, the mainstream media) inclines listeners to disbelieve what those sources say. Some philosophers consider placing trust in unreliable, unqualified, or dishonest sources to be a kind of *epistemic injustice*, of denying credibility to those who deserve it and lending credibility to those who don’t. At best this can be branded a failure of *epistemic vigilance* or paying attention to truth cues and standards and at worst a kind of *epistemic akrasia*, weakness or lack of control that results in believing what we should not and not believing what we should.

Most emphatically, W. K. Clifford questioned the very rectitude of belief and heralded the virtue of nonbelief; arguing in his 1877 “The Ethics of Belief” that “it is wrong, always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence,” he endorsed nonbelief in many if not most circumstances. Indeed, philosophers also speak of *virtue epistemology*, which orients not to the truth-status of propositions but to the qualities or virtues of human actors, specifically the desirable cognitive skills that an ordinary person should possess to think well and distinguish fact from fabrication.

As mentioned above (and pursued extensively below), humans neither know nor believe alone but within social groups and relationships (hence social epistemology). This means that people know or do not know, believe or do not believe, not only through introspection but through interaction; it also means that we potentially need to think of epistemology in the plural, as *epistemologies*, which may, in Rini’s estimate, evolve into *partisan epistemologies* in which members develop and circulate group-specific (non)knowledge and (non)belief as “a peculiar kind of testimony” (2017: E43) based on their own epistemic practices and their own standards of epistemic virtue. At the extreme, Furman stresses how “exclusionary social epistemic structures are often constructed to offer their members safety, either actual or perceived” (2022: 1), becoming what she calls “epistemic bunkers.”

Finally for now, philosophers can plumb the phenomenology of nonbelief, as Kattumana (2022) does in regard to nonbelief in vaccines, elucidating the “natural attitude” assumptions and experienced “lifeworlds” of nonbelievers in *x*—especially in contrast to the experiences and lifeworlds of believers in *x*. Philosophers have already begun to tackle nonbelief in such practical arenas as climate change denial, science skepticism, conspiracy theory, and fake news.

Psychology, on the other hand, brings a different but equally valuable perspective to apistology. Are there individual mental or personality traits that correlate with nonbelief? The first thing that psychological studies suggest is that nonbelief is not a simple artifact of stupidity or poor cognitive skills; further, specifically in the case of religious nonbelief, such individuals are not less moral, nor are they more depressed, damaged products of broken homes (regardless of Vitz’s [1999] spurious assertion that atheism can be reduced to fatherless childhood), or more psychologically troubled than the general

population. Psychological profiles of atheists do reveal, nonetheless, certain common features, such as “open-minded and analytical thinking styles” and rationalistic and humanistic worldviews (Uzarevic and Coleman 2021).

However, as apisteology insists, nonbelief does not begin and end with religion, and there are grounds to conclude that the psychology of religious nonbelief is different from that of other instances and occasions of nonbelief. Psychologists have devoted considerable effort to understanding people who fail or refuse to believe common and well-supported knowledge. Some fall prey to normal cognitive biases and heuristics, including confirmation bias (discounting or disbelieving evidence that contradicts pre-existing beliefs), preference for anecdotal over statistical data, belief perseverance (clinging to previous and long-held ideas or beliefs), and so forth. One explanation that is frequently cited is cognitive dissonance, the discomfort that we feel when new information does not support our prior beliefs and sense of self. Indeed, the concept of cognitive dissonance was invented to explain the belief persistence of members of a religious movement when their prophecy of the world’s end was decisively falsified, that is, when facts and experiences would lead, we assume, to nonbelief in the group’s failed beliefs (Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter 1956). Instead, individuals in such situations often relieve the pain by ignoring contrary facts, reinterpreting their beliefs in hindsight, or—in a phenomenon all-too-well-known as the backlash effect—actually believing more firmly in their original refuted claim.

Another crucial psychological process relevant to apisteology is motivated reasoning, by which thinkers strive “to arrive at a particular, directional conclusion” no matter what the facts seem to dictate; as Kunda put it, “people motivated to arrive at a particular conclusion attempt to be rational and to construct a justification of their desired conclusion that would persuade a dispassionate observer” (1990: 482). For many researchers, motivated reasoning is closely tied to cognitive dissonance, and both are tied to overconfidence in one’s own knowledge and cognitive abilities and to fear, need for certainty, and “reactance” or “the negative feelings that people experience when their freedom is somehow threatened” (Heid 2020), including perversely the freedom to believe whatever you want, despite the facts.

Psychologists have also done targeted research on folks whose nonbelief manifests as flat-earthism, science denial, and conspiracy thinking, which are sometimes interconnected. Landrum, Olshansky, and Richards found that susceptibility to flat-earth messages correlated with “lower science intelligence and higher conspiracy mentality” (2021: 136), although interestingly religious justifications for flat-earth belief were less appealing than scientific ones. In their influential research Swami et al. link conspiracy beliefs (thus, inclinations not to believe or trust authorities and mainstream information sources) positively with attitudes such as political cynicism, defiance of authority, and “self-esteem maintenance processes” and negatively with “agreeableness” which they further associated with “suspicion and antagonism toward others” (2010: 749-50). The same study gives us something else that psychology often generates, namely, a scale or inventory to measure and predict attitudes, in this case a conspiracist beliefs scale (Bruder et al. [2013] likewise constructed the five-item Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire). Some scholars have even raised hopes of discovering a neurological basis for belief in conspiracies and other “alternative facts” and nonbelief in established fact and reputable sources.

Psychology of course does not study the individual in isolation (as such never exists). Both psychologists and philosophers, who have characteristically posited the valiant individual knower/believer, understand that (non)knowledge and (non)belief are acquired and perpetuated in groups and relationships. Especially significant for social psychology is the concept of identity. We learn (non)knowledge and (non)belief from others, and once learned those items become elements of our personal identity. Once so integrated and invested, altering (non)belief equates to altering identity, which equates to a shift in trust and commitment. In short, (non)believing is a matter of (non)belonging, making (non)beliefs resistant to change. Van Bavel and Pereira go so far as to propose “an identity-based model of belief” resulting in a *partisan brain* to “explain why people place party loyalty over policy, and even over truth” (2018: 213).

At the other end of the social psychology spectrum is sociology, which emphasizes the social relations and institutions within which our (seemingly) personal beliefs and nonbeliefs are formed and fostered. There has naturally been a great amount of work done on the sociology of religious nonbelief,

including surveys and censuses of atheists and other irreligionists. It is immanently clear that people tend to share the beliefs and nonbeliefs of their “in-group” and “significant others,” two famous concepts in sociology; naturally too, humans are not born with beliefs or nonbeliefs but must acquire them, first by coming into contact with others who already possess them. Hence, group membership and group dynamics are powerful forces of (non)belief.

So, beyond statistical information about the prevalence and social location (i.e. age, gender, geographic region, education, and other social variables) of nonbelief, sociologists point to issues of group membership and identity. Nina Eliasoph explains that people who disbelieve in science “are often trying to uphold membership in something that they find meaningful” (Heid 2020). Accordingly, apparently psychological processes like cognitive dissonance and reactance become collective social processes, since as Eliasoph adds, “Once a community absorbs an idea into its collective viewpoint, rejecting that idea becomes akin to rejecting the whole community.” Conversely, once an idea, fact, or belief is ruled out of the community’s viewpoint, accepting it becomes not only a matter of cognitive reorientation but of group disloyalty and, at the extreme, potential apostasy.

Further processes exclusive to groups include leadership and collective action (e.g. Hoffer’s famous 1951 *The True Believer*), boundary maintenance tactics and out-group prejudices (e.g. Allport 1954), and symbolic and social capital (e.g. Bourdieu 1984). Once a group has recognized a leader, the group tends to adopt the attitudes and beliefs (and disbeliefs) of that figure; further, any collective activity including marching and protesting tends to solidify identity and commitment to a (non)belief. Groups have mechanisms to keep individuals and ideas inside their boundaries and to defend those boundaries against foreign individuals and ideas; in fact, an outside idea or belief is often rejected *because* it is carried by an outside individual, especially one in whom trust has already been poisoned. Then, within the group, the avowal of shared (non)beliefs confers prestige and “capital” on members. And, as mentioned in the philosophical presentation above, groups develop into epistemic communities and, at worst, epistemic bunkers.

Beyond the primary group, the (non)beliefs of individuals are influenced by larger-scale social forces, like institutions and outlets that disseminate and propagate specific beliefs while undermining others, facilitating nonbelief in the latter. Lately Facebook and Twitter have come under criticism for providing platforms for advancing false claims and attacking credible ones and their spokespersons, and while those services in one sense are only conduits for the ideas of others, they also employ algorithms that feed (non)beliefs to particular communities (hence the infamous information bubbles and echo chambers). Some observers have accentuated the deliberate and self-interested promotion of alternative facts and suspicion toward reality by government, party operatives and their appendages (for instance, Fox News or InfoWars), and corporations. David Michaels (2008) is one who documented how corporations like tobacco companies weaponized doubt—literally conceiving their main product as not cigarettes but doubt in the health consequences of smoking—via such methods as questioning and undermining legitimate scientific research, funding their own “alternative science” which, unsurprisingly, concluded that smoking was harmless if not healthy, and other tricks and feints. Many other investigators have described circumstances in which industry misleads and misinforms the public, encouraging the public to disbelieve the authorities whose messages would increase costs and decrease sales.

At the grandest scale, sociology reveals how the contours of society and its overall ethos are conducive to various (non)beliefs. The most celebrated example is secularization theory, which, since Karl Marx and Max Weber, has held that modern society is inhospitable to religion, with its urbanization, industrialization, bureaucracy, and general rationalization and standardization of life. Less well-researched is how these fundamental aspects of any given society support or weaken particular beliefs and nonbeliefs, in science, the media, scholars, and politicians and their respective claims of and to knowledge (which also suggests a valuable role for the social history of nonbelief). At a finer level of analysis, social conditions of the moment can breed (non)beliefs, such as Bruder et al.’s observation that people vulnerable to social and economic precarity, like ethnic minorities and those experiencing unemployment, are more prone to believe conspiracy theories and to disbelieve mainstream authorities.



Finally for present purposes, anthropology provides another dose of conceptual criticism and empirical diversity to the study of nonbelief. This discipline's special talents—ethnography (the thick description of others' lifeworlds) and comparative/cross-cultural investigation—reveal just how complex, varied, and utterly social nonbelief is. First and foremost, anthropologists have taught that "belief" is not a universal cross-cultural concept and that even when a culture possesses a concept of "belief" it does not always apply that concept to religion. It seems likely that a search for nonbelief across cultures would yield the same outcome. Further, in the province of religion, many anthropologists have observed people expressing doubt or nonbelief about their own society's supernatural claims, for instance Iban (Borneo/Kalimantan) toward their shamans (Wadley, Pashia, and Palmer 2006) or Trinidadian Orisa followers toward their gods (Glazier 2008). Even secularism and atheism are not understood or practiced uniformly across cultures.

Beyond religion, anthropology has pondered trust and non-trust as a cultural problem, obviously closely related to belief and nonbelief (indeed, non-trust is a subsection of apisteology). Contrary to the assumption that trust is essential for social integration, fieldworkers find that mistrust and distrust can be oddly integrative. Non-trust certainly creates and sustains categories and relationships of "the trustworthy" and the "untrustworthy," strengthening epistemic communities and their imperviousness to unwanted knowledge. During an Ebola outbreak in Guinea, locals were mistrustful toward medical workers, suspicious of their motivations, hostile toward their elite and condescending knowledge and their connection to the government—a mistrust that was stoked by the political opposition—and thus dubious of their medical "facts" (Somparé and Somparé 2018). More generally, Carey argues that the Berbers of Morocco's mountains actively cultivate untrustworthiness through ambiguous, contradictory, and humorous speech that establishes "a space of unverifiable possibility" in which the very unbeliability of their words grants a certain freedom of action (2017: 21).

These two examples endorse and enlarge the previous disciplines' emphasis on the social nature of nonbelief. Guinea and Morocco are only two cases of cultural and national differences in style and content of nonbelief; a comparison of skepticism regarding COVID-19 illustrates variations between Ireland (where skeptics perceived it through the lens of the colonial history and resistance to the police state), Poland (where deniers combined anti-Semitism, opposition to "Big Pharma," and fears that they were lab rats for Western vaccine testing), and the United States (where radical individualism, anti-government populism, and worries over the fading America dream fed doubts)—all of which, just as in the previous cases, "opens a space for alternative forms of knowing" (Sobo and Drajzkiewicz 2021: 73).

These alternative forms of knowing—in other words, not believing well-founded facts and instead believing unsound or wild theories—are largely due to pre-existing trusts/mistrusts and the social commitments on which they are founded. As Sobo succinctly phrases it, "selection precedes rejection" (2016: 348). This draws our attention again to social networks, where (mis)information and (non)belief are formed and shared. Belief and nonbelief are seldom if ever purely individual processes but depend on whom we talk to, what information sources we consume, and what groups (and societies/nations) we belong to. These insights underscore the affective and identity qualities of *collective* and *socially/subculturally-specific* nonbelief. It further compels us to consider, as some anthropologists have begun to do, not just the provision and transmission of facts but their *reception*. So-called "reception studies" give up-close glimpses of how and why individuals and groups (mis)understand, (mis)use, and ultimately accept or reject (or, as some have added, refuse or abstain from) and believe or not-believe various claims, as in Rudiak-Gould's (2013) analysis of how Marshall Islanders receive climate change information—which apparently literally impacts what people see around them.

## Conclusion

Space has only allowed us to consider four disciplines and those in only the most preliminary way. Philosophy, psychology, sociology, and anthropology are hardly the only disciplines with ideas and insights to assist apisteology, though. Scholars in political science, economics, history, computer science, library science, journalism, education, and even natural sciences (particularly biology and neuroscience)

have all done valuable work on nonbelief in general, as well as on nonbeliefs specific to their disciplinary domains (e.g. political nonbelief, scientific nonbelief, and so forth). Without knowing it, and without a term to unify them, researchers have been approaching apisteology from many different directions and slowly building the case for a distinct field of inquiry.

To be human is to believe—and to not-believe, simultaneously. No one believes everything they hear (and no one hears everything), nor do we disbelieve everything. Life instead is a complex, and often inconsistent, tapestry of belief and nonbelief, just as it is of knowledge and non-knowledge or ignorance. We return, then, to where we began, with the analogy between not-believing and not-knowing. Neither is entirely a default or passive state: not-believing, like not-knowing, is often an accomplishment, for the individual and/or for the groups to which she belongs. Neither is a totally settled state: people change their (non)beliefs and (non)knowledge throughout their lifetimes. And neither is completely derivative or residual from their opposite. Agnotology has proven the importance of studying not-knowing in its own right, as a social process with identifiable characteristics and demonstrable consequences. Apesteology too is an urgently needed enterprise to understand the processes, characteristics, and consequences of not-believing.

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