

Agnosticism, Appearance, and Reality

by [Kenneth Francis](#) (March 2021)



Couple Riding, Wassily Kandinsky, 1906

When we hear or read about the word 'agnosticism,' many people tend to believe that it refers exclusively to scepticism on belief in the existence of God. But that's not the case. People can be agnostic on many things, such as historical events, like the authenticity of the moon landings, who shot JFK, or even the existence of the external world.

In my youth, I was an agnostic sitting on the proverbial fence on all things theological, but I eventually jumped off when my cosmic rear end began to cause me much pain (the origin of that pain came from my disordered soul which I didn't believe existed back then).

So, I want to concentrate, in a general way, on an example on how agnosticism can be seen as a kind of knowledge claim and not a cautious, rational scepticism. I also want to add a geo-spatial component to the essay linked with agnosticism as to how we perceive the external world in both its appearance and reality and how that shapes our beliefs.

The American writer, public speaker and documentary maker Dinesh D'Souza is a man who has his worldview solidly based in reality. He also comes across as a highly intellectual, decent man. Over the years, I watched most of his speeches and debates and found him to be dynamic in his delivery, fair and balanced, and quite witty with a funny sense of humour.

Lately, on a regular online slot, he has a podcast, where he muses on social and current affairs both domestically and internationally. His views are mostly informative and I enjoy watching his videos.

However, in his recent January 25 podcast, he spoke of agnosticism and how many believers in God are in some way agnostic. He said the following, while also commenting on faith, belief and knowledge (edited version):

"...You have to make a distinction in believing something and knowing something. A belief is something that you hold but it stops short of knowledge which is something that you know definitively and for sure without a shadow of a doubt... It doesn't take any faith for me to believe in trees; it doesn't take any faith for me to believe in my wife standing here in front of me and producing this podcast. I don't have to believe in Debbie [his wife], because I know her; she's right here. Belief is one step short of knowledge and it creates room for faith..."

Dinesh says "it doesn't take faith for me to believe in trees" or belief in his wife standing in front of him. Really? Can one have certitude of the reality of the external world? Could that 'tree' Dinesh sees or his wife, Debbie, be figments of his imagination? I don't believe they are but, according to solipsism, which is extremely hard to refute, both 'tree' and 'Debbie' might not exist externally but only in the mind of Dinesh. In philosophy, this is called the problem of other minds (For the record, I find solipsism both fascinating and disturbing, but to repeat, I believe Debbie, Dinesh and trees exist, and that's based on reasonable faith not blind faith.)

There seems to be no way of either proving or disproving that solipsism is true or false, unless one takes a leap of *reasonable* faith (not blind) and believes in God or that the external world is real and contains other minds. It seems the only certitude is, "I think, therefore I am," to quote Descartes. That is, you can be certain that you definitely exist.

Dinesh was responding to comments made by astrophysicist [@NERIconoclast](#)