# RESTORING THE BURDEN OF PROOF:CLARIFYING ATHEISM,THEISM,AND AGNOSTICISM IN CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSE

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**Abstract**
*This paper critically examines the misuse of the "burden of proof" concept within contemporary atheist discourse, focusing on influential figures such as Armin Navabi, Todd C. Moody, David Silverman, and Peter Boghossian. Utilizing Shoaib Malik's philosophical distinctions between ontological and epistemological claims, this analysis challenges atheists' redefinition of atheism as merely "lack of belief" rather than an explicit denial of God's existence. Such redefinitions, achieved through semantic fusion and morphological fission, allow atheists to evade evidentiary responsibilities while implicitly advancing strong ontological assertions. By dissecting arguments from prominent atheist voices, this paper demonstrates that agnosticism—not atheism—is the more appropriate default position in the absence of compelling evidence. Furthermore, global atheism, characterized by its broad rejection of all deity concepts, carries a significant but often overlooked epistemic burden. This study advocates restoring conceptual clarity to the discourse on theism, atheism, and agnosticism, emphasizing intellectual consistency and accountability .*

**Keywords:** burden of proof, atheism, agnosticism, ontology, epistemology, Islamic philosophy

## Introduction

In contemporary debates about God's existence, no philosophical concept is more frequently misused or strategically manipulated than the burden of proof. A notable trend among atheist authors and activists involves defining atheism not as an explicit claim—that God does not exist—but merely as a psychological state of "lack of belief." Far from being a neutral terminological adjustment, this move strategically enables atheists to avoid the evidentiary burdens typically associated with their ontological assertions. Figures such as Armin Navabi, Todd C. Moody, David Silverman, and Peter Boghossian exemplify this approach, arguing that only theists bear the responsibility to justify their beliefs. At the same time, atheists purportedly have the right to disbelieve without justification.

This paper argues that redefining atheism in this manner conflates epistemological uncertainty (agnosticism) with ontological denial (atheism), undermining rational inquiry and philosophical precision. The frequently cited analogy equating atheism to "innocent until proven guilty" quickly dissolves upon distinguishing between ontology (claims about reality) and epistemology (claims about knowledge). If atheism explicitly claims, "God does not exist," it logically carries the same burden of proof as theism's claim, "God exists." A mere statement of disbelief does not exempt one from intellectual accountability.

To address these conceptual errors, this study builds on Shoaib Malik's[1] analytical framework, highlighting clear distinctions between ontological claims (theism and atheism) and epistemological positions (agnosticism). Malik points out key fallacies in modern atheist rhetoric: "**semantic fusion**," where the lack of belief in God is combined with the out right denial of God, under the single label of 'atheism', and "**morphological fission**," which splits atheism into

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[1] Malik, S. A. (2018). Defining atheism and the burden of proof. *Philosophy, 93*(4), 279–302.

"negative" (lack of belief) and "positive" (explicit denial) categories, while treating both ambiguously as atheism.

These rhetorical strategies allow atheists to project neutrality while implicitly asserting strong metaphysical positions. Consequently, atheists often alternate strategically between claiming epistemic humility (agnosticism) and asserting ontological certainty (atheism). Such equivocation blurs important philosophical boundaries, shifts undue burdens onto theists, and distorts intellectual debates.

Through a critical evaluation of Navabi, Moody, Silverman, and Boghossian's arguments within Malik's conceptual framework—particularly in distinguishing between **local atheism**, i.e., the specific denial of a god concept, and **global atheism**, i.e., the rejection of all deity concepts—this paper will demonstrate that global atheism is ambitious and requires substantial evidence. Agnosticism, therefore, remains the logical default position in the absence of decisive evidence.

Ultimately, this research aims to achieve philosophical clarity, intellectual honesty, and conceptual discipline within contemporary atheism-theism debates. Properly assigning the burden of proof is not merely a matter of academic rigor but an essential step toward authentic dialogue and rational discourse.

## Conceptual Foundations

To meaningfully discuss the burden of proof in debates about God's existence, it is essential first to clarify key philosophical concepts. Contemporary atheist thinkers often blur critical distinctions by employing vague or strategically fluid definitions of atheism and agnosticism. This section aims to establish clarity by differentiating ontology from epistemology and carefully defining the concepts of theism, atheism, and agnosticism. It further explores distinctions between local and global atheism and addresses common misconceptions surrounding the burden of proof.

## Ontology vs. Epistemology

Confusion frequently arises from conflating ontology (claims about what exists) with epistemology (claims about what can be known). Clearly distinguishing these terms is foundational:

- **Theism** explicitly affirms the ontological claim: God exists.
- **Atheism** explicitly denies the ontological claim: God exists.
- **Agnosticism**, by contrast, is epistemological, representing uncertainty or an assertion of unknowability concerning God's existence.

Defining atheism as merely a "lack of belief" wrongly places atheism within the epistemological category of agnosticism, causing significant philosophical confusion. This conflation allows atheists to evade justifying their positions while implicitly asserting strong metaphysical claims.

## Defining Theism, Atheism, and Agnosticism

Standard philosophical dictionaries define 'atheist' as a noun and an adjective.

"One who denies or disbelieves the existence of a God".[2] Oxford English Dictionary.

"Someone who does not believe in any god or gods, or who believes that no god or gods exist." [3] Cambridge Dictionary.

"A person who does not believe in the existence of a god or any gods: one who subscribes to or advocates atheism."[4] Merriam-Webster.

These dictionaries, as shown, do not define atheism simply as "lack of belief." It is essential to note how contemporary atheists, such as David Silverman and Armin Navabi, selectively reinterpret definitions to evade philosophical accountability.

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[2] https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=atheist

[3] https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/atheist

[4] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/atheist

Malik identifies two primary strategies in this redefinition:
- **Semantic Fusion**: Merging "lack of belief" (epistemological uncertainty) and explicit denial (ontological rejection) under "atheism."
- **Morphological Fission**: Creating subdivisions ("positive atheism" for explicit denial, "negative atheism" for lack of belief) to obscure atheism's original ontological commitment.

Despite modern attempts to redefine atheism, linguistic history and philosophical clarity support understanding atheism explicitly as the denial of God's existence, distinct from agnostic uncertainty.

## Evolution of Atheism: Local vs. Global

Historically, atheism evolved from a negative label for doctrinal heresy to explicitly signifying disbelief in God's existence. Jeanine Diller distinguishes:
- **Local Atheism**: Rejection of specific deity conceptions.
- **Global Atheism**: Rejection of all deity conceptions.

This distinction is crucial. Local atheism is limited in scope, while global atheism is a broad ontological claim that entails significant epistemic responsibilities often overlooked in atheist rhetoric.

## Burden of Proof: Defaults, Claims, and Misuse

The "burden of proof" (BOP) principle typically assigns responsibility to those making positive claims. Atheists frequently misuse this principle by asserting atheism as the default stance. Malik counters by emphasizing:
- Positive claims ("God exists") require justification.
- Negative claims ("God does not exist") equally require justification.
- Neutral epistemological claims ("I don't know") require no initial justification unless explicitly asserted as the correct stance.

## Analysis and Refutation of Key Atheist Views
### Armin Navabi

Armin Navabi's approach exemplifies Malik's concept of **semantic fusion**, where distinct philosophical positions are deliberately merged to create rhetorical advantage. In this case, Navabi conflates atheism and agnosticism, strategically framing atheism as a mere "lack of belief" rather than a definitive stance on the existence of God. By doing so, he redefines atheism as a passive psychological state, one that ostensibly carries no burden of proof. This framing enables him to avoid evidentiary accountability while still advancing explicit ontological claims—such as "There is no God"—that contradict his claim to neutrality. As part of this maneuver, Navabi is also guilty of what Malik terms **morphological fission**, which splits atheism into "negative" (lack of belief) and "positive" (explicit denial) categories, while treating both ambiguously under the same atheistic label. This allows him to shift between positions without clarifying which one he is defending at any given moment.

Navabi reinforces this strategy with statements like, "An atheist doesn't need to justify her lack of belief any further.[5] " Positioning atheism beyond the reach of rational challenge. Yet, he simultaneously broadens the category, stating, "Atheism exists on a spectrum. Some atheists claim absolute certainty in God's nonexistence. Others remain unconvinced and refuse to believe in a deity without compelling evidence.[6]" This fluid shifting between certainty and skepticism reflects **semantic fusion** in action: the blending of ontological assertion and epistemological doubt into a single, adaptable framework. Rather than clarify the scope of atheism, Navabi's

[5] Navabi, A. (2014). *Why there is no God: Simple responses to 20 common arguments for the existence of God* (p. 7). Atheist Republic.
[6] Navabi, A. (2014). *Why there is no God: Simple responses to 20 common arguments for the existence of God* (p. 7,8). Atheist Republic.

formulation blurs it—using **morphological fission** to divide the concept while using **semantic fusion** to rhetorically treat it as unified—thus allowing atheism to function both as a definitive worldview and a rhetorically insulated non-position.

### Todd C. Moody

Todd C. Moody appeals to what he calls the "presumption of atheism," presenting atheism as the default epistemic stance and shifting the entire burden of proof onto theists. He argues that because negative propositions—such as "God does not exist"—cannot be proved. [7] Atheism should stand unchallenged until affirmative evidence for God is produced. To bolster this claim, Moody borrows the legal principle of "innocent until proven guilty," suggesting that theism, like a defendant, must supply all the evidence. At the same time, atheism, like the presumption of innocence, enjoys immunity from scrutiny.

This argument falters on multiple fronts. First, Moody conflates epistemic neutrality with ontological denial. An authentically neutral stance is agnosticism, which withholds judgment pending evidence; atheism, by contrast, makes the positive ontological claim that no deity exists. Treating atheism as if it were merely a lack of belief allows the atheist to elude the evidentiary standards ordinarily required of any substantive position. Second, the courtroom analogy is philosophically unsound. The presumption of innocence is a procedural safeguard designed to prevent wrongful punishment, not a rule for establishing metaphysical truths. In rational inquiry, both affirmative and negative existential claims bear a justificatory burden: asserting "there is a God" and asserting "there is no God" alike require arguments. Finally, Moody's claim that negative propositions are unprovable ignores well-established logical and evidential techniques. Philosophers routinely refute proposed entities by exposing internal contradictions, demonstrating incoherence, or adducing decisive counter-evidence—methods that credibly establish many negative conclusions. By declaring negative claims untestable, Moody effectively shields atheism from precisely the rational scrutiny he demands of theism, substituting rhetorical maneuvering for genuine philosophical rigor.

### David Silverman

David Silverman, a well-known atheist activist with Jewish heritage, argues in his book *Fighting God* that atheism should be understood not as a positive claim that God does not exist, but as a passive absence of belief. He expresses disagreement with standard dictionary definitions, including Merriam-Webster's, and instead praises what he claims is the definition from the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "The Oxford English Dictionary, thankfully, gets it right: an atheist is a 'person who disbelieves or lacks belief in the existence of God or gods.[8] " Silverman emphasizes the importance of etymology to support this framing, citing DefineAtheism.com: "Absence (rather than opposition) is indicated by the 'a-' prefix, meaning 'without,' hence 'atheism can be concisely characterised as 'without theism.'" From this, he concludes that "atheism is therefore 'the absence of belief in the existence of a god or gods,' which makes it a broad term that has many implications, not just absolute denial. Atheism is without that belief, not against it. Got it?"[9]

There are several problems with this argument. To begin with, the definition Silverman attributes to the *Oxford English Dictionary* is incorrect. The OED defines an *atheist* as "[o]ne who denies or disbelieves the existence of a God," a definition which indicates active rejection. The version Silverman uses is taken from Oxford Dictionaries (OD), a different online platform that focuses on contemporary and less formal usages. By conflating these two sources, Silverman misrepresents OD's more accessible phrasing as if it were the authoritative academic position of the OED. His reliance on the etymology of the prefix "a" is also flawed. While "a" does mean

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[7] Moody, T. C. (2013). *Does God exist? A dialogue on the proofs for God's existence* (2nd ed., p. 7). Hackett Publishing Company.

[8] David Silverman, Fighting God: An Atheist Manifesto for a Religious World (St Martin's Press, 2015), 5.

[9] Silverman Fighting God op. cit., 6.

"without," contemporary philosophical and lexical usage of the term *atheism* goes beyond etymological roots. Language evolves, and philosophical definitions must take into account both historical and practical usage—not just linguistic origins.

More significantly, Silverman's strategy involves a dual manipulation: he engages in what Malik calls **morphological fission**, dividing atheism into "negative" (lack of belief) and "positive" (explicit denial) forms, and then ambiguously treats both under the same label. This fusion allows him to assert definitive truth claims—such as "There is no God"—while retreating to the softer, less accountable stance of merely "lacking belief" when challenged. At the same time, he engages in **semantic fusion** by blurring the boundary between atheism and agnosticism, effectively collapsing the two categories into one. If atheism includes both disbelief and denial, the term *agnostic* becomes redundant.

This redundancy is made even more apparent when Silverman states, "Agnostic is a useless term when used as a religious identifier. It states gods, the finite details of the universe, etc., are simply unknowable, which as you may notice is not an expression of belief or disbelief, but rather of knowledge. This is a totally useless concept because anyone can say that about everything … I know there is no god just as surely as I know there is no Santa Claus, of which I am quite certain even though I've never been to the North Pole personally. Again, when Santa lands on my roof, I will believe. Until there is proof, Santa, like God, is a myth." [10] This quotation, in conjunction with his earlier ones, illustrates how—if atheism is defined as both the absence of belief and the outright denial of God's existence—it becomes a self-serving, inconsistent framework. Silverman tries to preemptively discard agnosticism by redefining it in the most rigid way possible: as a claim that knowledge of God is absolutely impossible. In doing so, he ignores the more modest and widely held position of *soft agnosticism*, which maintains that the existence of God is currently unknown or unknowable, but not necessarily in principle.

This rhetorical move allows Silverman to conflate epistemological caution with ontological assertion, confusing the distinction between what we know and what is. When ontological claims (such as "God does not exist") are conflated with epistemological modesty ("we don't or can't know"), the conceptual boundaries between atheism and agnosticism collapse. This confusion ultimately undermines both categories and erodes the philosophical clarity needed for meaningful debate. While Silverman's redefinition may serve the goals of atheist activism, it does so at the cost of intellectual consistency and terminological precision.
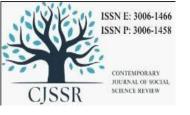
**Peter Boghossian**

Peter Boghossian's The Manual for Creating Atheists exemplifies how definitional ambiguity is employed to merge atheism and agnosticism, thereby distorting their philosophical boundaries. In defining atheism, Boghossian writes: "'Atheists' as I use the term, means, 'There's insufficient evidence to warrant belief in a divine, supernatural creator of the universe. However, if I were shown sufficient evidence to warrant belief in such an entity, then I would believe.' … A difference between an atheist and a person of faith is that an atheist is willing to revise their belief (if provided sufficient evidence); the faithful permit no such revision." Here, Boghossian presents atheism not as a denial of God's existence, but as a position grounded in the absence of sufficient evidence. He emphasizes a posture of openness and rational revision, suggesting that atheists are intellectually flexible, while contrasting them unfavorably with people of faith, whom he characterizes as dogmatic and closed to evidence.

When Boghossian turns to define agnosticism, he writes: "Agnostics think there's not enough evidence to warrant belief in God, but because it's logically possible, they remain unsure of God's existence." This definition overlaps significantly with the one he provides for atheism. In both cases, the emphasis is placed on the insufficiency of evidence and the withholding of belief. Aside

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[10] Silverman Fighting God op. cit., 11.

from drawing a moral contrast between theist and non-theist positions—framing the former as arrogant and the latter as intellectually virtuous—Boghossian fails to offer a clear, functional distinction between atheism and agnosticism. The two are presented as psychologically and epistemologically similar, differing only in subtle degrees of confidence or terminology.

The main issue with this approach is that it merges two philosophically different positions into one vague and flexible category. Whether intentional or not, this conflation allows two mutually exclusive positions—*disbelief in God* and *lack of belief in God*—to coexist under the single label of atheism. One cannot logically disbelieve in God and simultaneously claim to lack belief merely; the former implies a conclusion has been reached, while the latter means a suspension of judgment. When such confusion is introduced, it enables individuals to shift—either knowingly or unknowingly—between stronger and weaker claims, depending on the context. This rhetorical maneuver makes it challenging to determine where the burden of proof (BOP) lies. If atheism is a positive claim (that God does not exist), it carries a burden of defense; but if it is merely a passive withholding of belief, the burden is dismissed.

By merging these positions without clarity, Boghossian, like others who adopt similar definitions, undermines the coherence of the discussion. The result is a conceptual ambiguity that weakens philosophical precision and complicates debate. Without clear boundaries between atheism and agnosticism and consistent usage of terms, meaningful dialogue about belief, evidence, and truth becomes increasingly challenging to sustain.

**Implications of Misusing the Burden of Proof**

Misrepresenting the burden of proof (BOP) by redefining atheism as a mere "lack of belief" produces a range of philosophical, social, and discursive distortions. By merging atheism with agnosticism, contemporary atheist writers dissolve the clear conceptual boundaries that usually separate belief, denial, and suspension of judgment. This semantic fusion—highlighted by Malik—erodes the rational standards on which rigorous metaphysical debate depends: if terms are elastic enough to cover both denial and uncertainty, meaningful analysis of any claim about God becomes almost impossible.

The same definitional strategy carries significant socio-political consequences. Authors such as David Silverman and Armin Navabi expand the atheist label to include agnostics, the religiously indifferent, and even infants. Inflating the numbers in this way amplifies the perceived cultural and political influence of atheism, shaping public opinion and policy based on misleading demographic data rather than substantive conviction. What appears to be a dramatic rise in atheism is, on closer inspection, essentially a reclassification exercise.

For Muslim *daʿwah* and other forms of theistic outreach, the resulting epistemic imbalance is particularly acute. When atheism is portrayed as a neutral default, theists are pressed continually to justify their beliefs, while atheists evade comparable scrutiny by claiming simple skepticism. Dialogue degenerates into one-sided interrogation, inhibiting the reciprocal exchange of reasons that genuine philosophical engagement requires.

Finally, reframing atheism as the default stance conceals an epistemic arrogance under a veneer of humility. Authentic humility lies in acknowledging one's uncertainty—precisely the agnostic posture that these authors subsume under atheism. Once the rhetorical camouflage is removed, it becomes clear that explicit denial of God's existence carries an evidentiary burden fully comparable to that borne by theistic affirmation. Far from promoting open inquiry, the strategic misuse of the BOP thus weakens intellectual responsibility on all sides.

**Constructive Theist Position: Mutual Accountability in Dialogue**

Having critiqued the misuse of BOP by atheists, it is essential to articulate a constructive theist position grounded in mutual intellectual accountability. The theist's stance, particularly within Islamic discourse, embraces its evidentiary responsibilities clearly and consistently:

**Clarifying the Theist's Claim**

Theism explicitly asserts that God exists—an ontological claim. Hence, theists willingly assume the responsibility to justify through:

- **Philosophical Arguments:** cosmological, teleological, ontological, and moral arguments.
- **Cumulative Case Reasoning:** converging multiple independent lines of evidence (cosmic origins, fine-tuning, morality, consciousness).
- **Revelation and Testimony:** especially within Islam, where revealed scripture (Qur'an) and prophetic authenticity provide coherent epistemic grounding.

**Shared Burden of Proof: Restoring Fairness**

Philosophically balanced discourse demands that theists and atheists both acknowledge their evidentiary burdens clearly:

| Position | Ontological Claim | Burden of Proof? |
|---|---|---|
| Theism | "God exists" | Yes |
| Atheism (Classical) | "God does not exist." | Yes |
| Agnosticism | "I don't know or can't know" | No (unless claiming exclusive validity) |

Islamic discourse uniquely aligns with this balanced philosophical stance. The Qur'an explicitly challenges both belief and disbelief, demanding rational justification from believers and disbelievers alike:

*"Say: Bring your proof if you are truthful."* [11]

This approach anticipates modern philosophical principles by insisting on mutual accountability, removing intellectual double standards.

**Islamic Theism: A Model of Intellectual Integrity**

Islamic theology promotes rational inquiry and intellectual responsibility through consistent and explicit evidentiary demands. The Qur'an repeatedly emphasizes rationality, reflection, and evidence as pathways to truth, modeling intellectual integrity by explicitly inviting scrutiny rather than evading it:

*"Do they not reflect upon themselves? Allah has not created the heavens and the earth and what is between them except in truth and for a specified term. Indeed, many people deny meeting with their Lord."* [12]

By promoting epistemic transparency, Islam sets a philosophical standard for productive and meaningful dialogue.

**Conclusion**

This paper has critically evaluated how influential contemporary atheist authors strategically misuse and manipulate the concept of the burden of proof (BOP). By conflating atheism with agnosticism through semantic fusion and morphological fission, figures such as Armin Navabi, Todd C. Moody, David Silverman, and Peter Boghossian attempt to evade evidentiary accountability. These maneuvers enable atheists to implicitly or explicitly assert strong ontological claims against the existence of God while simultaneously refusing the responsibility of justification.

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[11] Holy Qur'an 2:111
[12] Holy Qur'an 30:8

Drawing on Shoaib Malik's analytical framework, this research underscores the necessity of clearly distinguishing between ontological claims (theism and atheism) and epistemological stances (agnosticism). The investigation demonstrates that atheism, properly understood as an explicit denial of God's existence, carries an evidentiary burden equivalent to that of theism. In contrast, agnosticism, characterized by epistemic humility and uncertainty, emerges as the authentic default position in the absence of compelling evidence.

By challenging atheist claims such as Todd C. Moody's assertion that negative claims cannot be proven, this paper reaffirms that both affirmative and negative ontological propositions inherently require rational justification. It further highlights the intellectual dishonesty of redefining atheism broadly to include categories that philosophically and linguistically belong to agnosticism.

Additionally, the paper addresses the broader philosophical, social, and theological implications of misusing the BOP, emphasizing the need for restoring mutual intellectual accountability. Islamic theism provides a robust model for such accountability by clearly defining and willingly accepting its evidentiary obligations. Islam's explicit invitation to rational discourse and evidence-based inquiry sets a valuable standard for balanced philosophical dialogue.

Ultimately, this paper advocates for reclaiming conceptual clarity, philosophical rigor, and intellectual integrity within contemporary theism-atheism debates. The burden of proof must be assigned adequately and equitably, facilitating honest and productive dialogue that respects philosophical precision and mutual accountability.