

# The New Skepticism

PAUL KURTZ

Skepticism, like all things, is good if used in moderation. It is essential for the healthy mind; but if taken to excess, it can lead to overweening doubt. Skepticism, if properly understood, is not a metaphysical picture of the unknowability of "ultimate reality"; it does not lead to an inevitable epistemological impasse; it need not culminate in existential despair or nihilism. Rather it should be considered as an essential methodological rule guiding us to examine critically all claims to knowledge and affirmations of value. Without it, we are apt to slip into complacent self-deception and dogmatism; with it, if prudently used, we can effectively advance the frontiers of inquiry and knowledge, and also apply it to practical life, ethics, and politics.

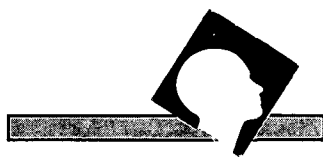
Briefly stated, a skeptic is one who is willing to question any claim to truth, asking for clarity in definition, consistency in logic, and adequacy of evidence. The use of skepticism is thus an essential part of objective scientific inquiry and the search for reliable knowledge.

Skepticism has deep roots in the philosophical tradition. The term derives from the Greek word *skeptikos*, which means "to consider, examine." It is akin to the Greek *skepsis*, which means "inquiry" and "doubt."

Skepticism provides powerful tools of criticism in science, philosophy, religion, morality, politics, and society. It is thought to be exceedingly difficult to apply it to ordinary life or to live consistently with its principles. For human beings seek certitudes to guide them, and the skeptical mode is often viewed with alarm by those who hunger for faith and conviction. Skepticism is the intractable foe of pretentious

---

This article has been adapted from Paul Kurtz's *The New Skepticism: Inquiry and Reliable Knowledge* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1992).



*Skeptical inquirers should be open-minded about new possibilities and be willing to question even the most well-established principles in the light of further inquiry.*

---

belief systems. When people demand definite answers to their queries, skepticism always seems to give them further questions to ponder. Yet in a profound sense, skepticism is an essential ingredient of all reflective conduct and an enduring characteristic of the educated mind.

Still, skeptics are considered dangerous because they question the reigning orthodoxies, the shibboleths and hosannas of any age. Although the skeptical attitude is an indelible part of reflective inquiry, can a person get beyond the skeptical orientation to develop positive directions and commitments in belief and behavior, and will skepticism enable one to do so?

Skeptics always bid those overwhelmed by Absolute Truth or Special Virtue to pause. They ask, "What do you mean?"—seeking clarification and definition—and "Why do you believe what you do?"—demanding reasons, evidence, justification, or proof. Like natives of Missouri, they say, "Show me." All too often probing skeptics discover that the unquestioned beliefs and many cherished values of the day rest on quixotic sands and that, by digging at their tottering foundations, they may hasten their collapse. Skeptics are able to detect contradictions within belief systems; they discover hypocrisies, double standards, disparities between what people profess and what they actually do; they point to the paucity of evidence for most of

humankind's revered belief systems.

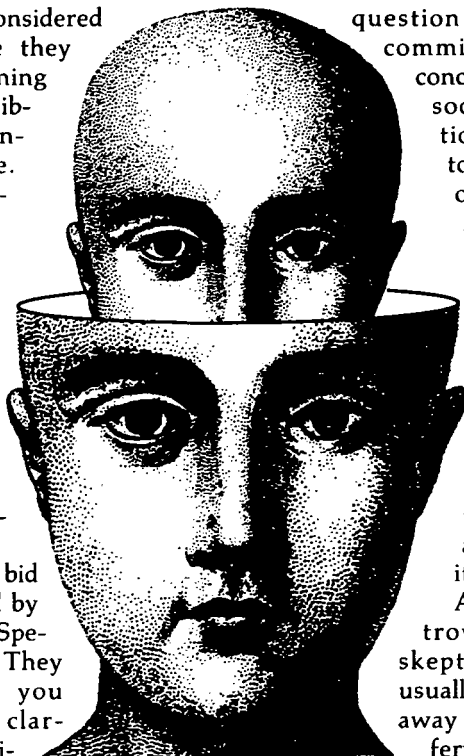
Skeptics are viewed as dissenters, heretics, radicals, subversive rogues, or worse, and they are bitterly castigated by the entrenched establishments who fear them. Revolutionary reformers are also wont to turn their

wrath on skeptical doubters who

question their passionate commitment to ill-conceived programs of social reconstruction. Skeptics wish to examine all sides of a question; and for every argument in favor of a thesis, they usually can find one or more arguments opposed to it. Extreme skepticism cannot consistently serve our practical interests, for insofar as it sires doubt, it inhibits actions.

All parties to a controversy may revile skeptics because they usually resist being swept away by the dominant fervor of the day.

Nevertheless, skepticism is *essential* to the quest for knowledge; for it is in the seedbed of puzzlement that genuine inquiry takes root. Without skepticism, we may remain mired in unexamined belief systems that are accepted as sacrosanct yet have no factual basis in reality. With it, we allow for some free play for the generation of new ideas and the growth of knowledge. Although the skeptical outlook may not be sufficient unto itself for any philosophy of the practical life, it provides a necessary condition for the reflective approach to life. Must skepticism leave us



floundering in a quagmire of indecision? Or does it permit us to go further, and to discover some probabilities by which we can live? Will it allow us to achieve reliable knowledge? Or must all new discoveries in turn give way to the probing criticisms of the skeptic's scalpel? The answer to these questions depends in part on what one means by skepticism, for there are various kinds that can be distinguished.

## *Nihilism*

*Total Negative Skepticism.* The first kind of skepticism that may be identified is nihilism. Its most extreme form is total negative skepticism. Here I am referring to skepticism as a complete rejection of all claims to truth or value. This kind of skepticism is mired in unlimited doubt, from which it never emerges. Knowledge is not possible, total skeptics aver. There is no certainty, no reliable basis for convictions, no truth at all. All that we encounter are appearances, impressions, sensations; and we have no guarantee that these correspond to anything in external reality. Indeed, we have no assurance that we are properly describing external objects "in themselves." Our senses, which lie at the heart of our experiential world, may deceive us. Our sense organs act as visors, shielding and limiting our perceptions, which vary from individual to individual and from species to species. Similar pitfalls await those who seek to root knowledge in the cognitive intuitions or deductive inferences of mathematics or logic, claim total skeptics. Meanings are irreducibly subjective and untranslatable into intersubjective or objective referents. Purely formal conceptual systems tell us more about the language we are using than about the nature of ultimate reality itself. In any

case, human beings are prone to err. For every proof in favor of a thesis, one may pose a counter-proof. Like the web that is spun by a spider, the entire structure may collapse when we disturb the glue that holds the threads together.

Not only is epistemic certainty impossible, maintain total skeptics, the very criteria by which we judge whether something is true or false are questionable. Knowledge is based upon the methods by which we evaluate claims to truth—whether empirical or rational. But these are simply assumed, they insist, and cannot be used to validate themselves without begging the question. Thus we can never get beyond the first stage of inquiry. Total skeptics end up in utter subjectivity, solipsists imprisoned in their own worlds, confused about the nature of knowledge. This is the total skeptics' approach to science, philosophy, and religion.

Nihilistic skepticism has also been used in ethics with devastating results. Here the total skeptic is a complete relativist, subjectivist, and emotivist. What is "good" or "bad," "right" or "wrong," varies among individuals and societies. There are no discernible normative standards other than taste and feeling, and there is no basis for objective moral judgment. We cannot discern principles that are universal or obligatory for morality. Complete cultural relativity is the only option for this kind of skepticism. Principles of justice are simply related to power or the social contract; there are no normative standards common to all social systems. In the face of moral controversy, total skeptics may become extreme doubters; all standards are equally untenable. They may thus become conservative traditionalists. If there are no reliable guides to moral conduct, then the only recourse is to follow custom. Ours is

not to reason why, ours is but to do or die, for there are no reasons. Or total skeptics may become cynical amorality for whom "anything goes." Who is to say that one thing is better or worse than anything else? they ask, for if there are no standards of justice discoverable in the nature of things, political morality in the last analysis is a question of force, custom, or passion, not of reason or of evidence.

This kind of total skepticism is self-contradictory; for in affirming that no knowledge is possible, these skeptics have already made an assertion. In denying that we can know reality, they often presuppose a phenomenalist or subjectivistic metaphysics in which sense impressions or ideas are the constitutive blocks out of which our knowledge of the world, however fragmented, is constructed. In asserting that there are no normative standards of ethics and politics, total skeptics sometimes advise us either to be tolerant of individual idiosyncrasies and respect cultural relativity, or to be courageous and follow our own quest to satisfy ambition or appetite. But this imperceptibly masks underlying value judgments that skeptics cherish. This kind of skepticism may be labeled "dogmatism"; for in resolutely rejecting the very possibility of knowledge or value, such skeptics are themselves introducing their own questionable assertions.

### *Neutral Skepticism*

One form of nihilistic skepticism that seeks to avoid dogmatism does so by assuming a completely neutral stance. Here skeptics will neither affirm nor deny anything. They are unwilling to utter any pronouncements, such as that sense perception or formal reasoning is unreliable. They reject any

type of skepticism that masks a theory of knowledge or reality in epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, and politics. Neutralists claim to have no such theory. They simply make personal statements and do not ask anyone to accept or reject them or be convinced or persuaded by their arguments. These are merely their own private expressions they are uttering, and they are not generalizable to others. For every argument in favor of a thesis, they can discover a counter-argument. The only option for neutral skeptics is thus to suspend judgment entirely. Here agnosticism rules the roost. They are unable in epistemology to discover any criteria of knowledge; in metaphysics, a theory of reality; in religion, a basis for belief or disbelief in God; in ethics and politics, any standards of virtue, value, or social justice.

The ancient pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Cratylus (fifth-fourth century B.C.) was overwhelmed by the fact that everything is changing, including our own phenomenological worlds of experience; and he therefore concluded that it is impossible to communicate knowledge or to fully understand anyone. According to legend, Cratylus refused to discuss anything with anyone and, since it was pointless to reply, only wiggled his finger when asked a question. The neutral state of suspension of belief, now known as Pyrrhonism, was defended by Pyrrho of Elis and had a great impact on the subsequent development of skepticism. It applied primarily to philosophical and metaphysical questions, where one is uncertain about what is ultimately true about reality, but it put aside questions of ordinary life, where convention and custom prevail. This form of skepticism also degenerates into nihilism, for in denying any form of knowledge it can lead to despair.

## Mitigated Skepticism

There is a fundamental difficulty with the forms of skepticism outlined above, for they are contrary to the demands of life. We need to function in the world—whatever its ultimate reality—and we need to develop some beliefs by which we may live and act. Perhaps our beliefs rest ultimately upon probabilities; nevertheless we need to develop knowledge as a pragmatic requirement of living and acting in the world. A modified form of skepticism was called *mitigated skepticism* by David Hume, the great eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher. It is a position that was also defended by the Greek philosopher Carneades of the second century B.C. Mitigated skeptics have confronted the black hole of nothingness and are skeptical about the ultimate reliability of knowledge claims. They are convinced that the foundations of knowledge and value are ephemeral and that it is impossible to establish ultimate truths about reality with any certainty. Nonetheless, we are forced by the exigencies of practical life to develop viable generalizations and to make choices, even though we can give no ultimate justification for them. One cannot find any secure basis for causal inferences about nature, other than the fact that there are regularities encountered within experience, on the basis of which we make predictions that the future will be like the past. But we have no ultimate foundation for this postulate of induction. Similarly, one cannot deduce what *ought* to be the case from what is. Morality is contingent on the sentiments of men and women who agree to abide by social convention in order to satisfy their multifarious desires as best they can.

Mitigated skepticism is not total, but only partial and limited, forced

upon us by the exigencies of living. It would be total if we were to follow philosophy to the end of the trail, to irremediable indecision and doubt. Fortunately, we take detours in life, and thus we live and act *as if* we had knowledge. Our generalizations are based upon experience and practice, and the inferences that we make on the basis of habit and custom serve as our guide.

## Unbelief

The term *skepticism* has sometimes been used as synonymous with *unbelief* or *disbelief* in any domain of knowledge. Actually there are two aspects to this—one is the *reflective* conviction that certain claims are unfounded or untrue, and hence not believable, and this seems a reasonable posture to take; the other is the negative *a priori* rejection of a belief without a careful examination of the grounds for that belief. Critics call this latter form of skepticism “dogmatism.” The word *unbelief* in both of these senses is usually taken to apply to religion, theology, the paranormal, and the occult.

In religion the unbeliever is usually an atheist—not simply a neutral agnostic—for this kind of skepticism rejects the claims of theists. The atheist denies the basic premises of theism: that God exists, that there is some ultimate purpose to the universe, that men and women have immortal souls, and that they can be saved by divine grace.

Reflective unbelievers find the language of transcendence basically unintelligible, even meaningless, and that is why they say they are skeptics. Or, more pointedly, if they have examined the arguments adduced historically to prove the existence of God, they find them invalid, hence unconvincing. They find the so-called

appeals to experience unwarranted: neither mysticism nor the appeal to miracles or revelation establishes the existence of transcendental realities. Moreover, they maintain that morality is possible without a belief in God. Unbelievers are critics of supernaturalistic claims, which they consider superstition. Indeed, they consider the God hypothesis to be without merit, a fanciful creation of human imagination that does not deserve careful examination by emancipated men and women. Many classical atheists (Baron d'Holbach, Diderot, Marx, Engels) fit into this category, for they were materialists first, and their religious skepticism and unbelief followed from their materialistic metaphysics. Such skeptics are dogmatic only if their unbelief is a form of doctrinaire faith and not based on rational grounds.

In the paranormal field, unbelievers similarly deny the reality of psi phenomena. They maintain that ESP, clairvoyance, precognition, psychokinesis, and the existence of discarnate souls are without sufficient evidence and contrary to our knowledge of how the material universe operates. Some skeptics deny paranormal phenomena on a priori grounds, i.e., they are to be rejected because they violate well-established physical laws. They can be considered dogmatists only if they refuse to examine the evidence brought by the proponents of the paranormal, or if they consider the level of science that has been reached on any one day to be its final formulation. Insofar as this kind of unbelief masks a closed mind, it is an illegitimate form of skepticism. If those who say that they are skeptics simply mean that they deny the existence of the paranormal realm, they are aparanormalists. The question to be asked of them always is, *Why?* For much as the believers can be judged to hold certain

convictions on the basis of inadequate evidence or faith, so the dogmatic unbelievers may reject such new claims because these violate their own preconceptions about the universe. This latter kind of skepticism has many faults and is in my judgment illegitimate. These skeptics are no longer open-minded inquirers, but debunkers. They are convinced that they have the Non-Truth, which they affirm resolutely, and in doing so they may slam shut the door to further discoveries.

### *Skeptical Inquiry*

There is yet another kind of skepticism, which differs from the kinds of skepticism encountered above. Indeed, this form of skepticism strongly criticizes nihilism, total and neutral; mitigated skepticism; and dogmatic unbelief—although it has learned something from each of them. This kind of skepticism I label “skeptical inquiry,” with inquiry rather than doubt as the motivation. I call it the *new skepticism*, although it has emerged in the contemporary world as an outgrowth of pragmatism. A key difference between this and earlier forms of skepticism is that it is *positive* and *constructive*. It involves the transformation of the negative critical analysis of the claims to knowledge into a positive contribution to the growth and development of skeptical inquiry. It is basically a form of *methodological* skepticism, for here skepticism is an essential phase of the process of inquiry; but it does not and need not lead to unbelief, despair, or hopelessness. This skepticism is not total, but is limited to the context under inquiry. Hence we may call it *selective* or *contextual* skepticism, for one need not doubt everything at the same time, but only certain questions in the limited context of investigation.

It is not neutral, because it believes that we do develop knowledge about the world. Accordingly, not only is human knowledge possible, but it can be found to be reliable; and we can in the normative realm act on the best evidence and reasons available. Knowledge is not simply limited to the descriptive or the formal sciences, but is discoverable in the normative fields of ethics and politics. Although this is a modified form of skepticism, it goes far beyond the mitigated skepticism of Hume; for it does not face an abyss of ultimate uncertainty, but is impressed by the ability of the human mind to understand and control nature.

The new skepticism is not dogmatic, for it holds that we should never by a priori rejection close the door to any kind of responsible investigation. Thus it is skeptical of dogmatic or narrow-minded atheism and apararnormalism. Nonetheless, it is willing to assert reflective *unbelief* about some claims that it finds lack adequate justification. It is willing to assert that some claims are unproved, improbable, or false.

Skepticism, as a method of doubt that demands evidence and reasons for hypotheses, is essential to the process of scientific research, philosophical dialogue, and critical intelligence. It is also vital in ordinary life, where the demands of common sense are always a challenge to us to develop and act upon the most reliable hypotheses and beliefs available. It is the foe of absolute certainty and dogmatic finality. It appreciates the snares and pitfalls of all kinds of human knowledge and the importance of the principles of fallibilism and probabilism in regard to the degrees of certainty of our knowledge. This differs sharply from the skepticisms of old, and it can contribute substantially to the advancement of human

knowledge and the moral progress of humankind. It has important implications for our knowledge of the universe and our moral and social life. Skepticism in this sense provides a positive and constructive *eupraxophy* that can assist us in interpreting the cosmos in which we live and in achieving some wisdom in conduct.

The new skepticism is more in tune with the demands of everyday knowledge than with speculative philosophy. Traditional skepticism has had all too little to say about the evident achievements of constructive skeptical inquiry. And derisive skeptical jabs hurled from the wings of the theater of life are not always appreciated, especially if they inhibit life from proceeding without interruption.

Skeptical inquiry is essential in any quest for knowledge or deliberative valuational judgment. But it is limited and focused, selective, and positive, and it is part and parcel of a genuine process of inquiry. This form of modified skepticism is formulated in the light of the following considerations:

There has already been an enormous advance in the sciences, both theoretically and technologically. This applies to the natural, biological, social, and behavioral sciences. The forms of classical skepticism of the ancient world that reemerged in the early modern period were unaware of the tremendous potential of scientific research. Pyrrhonic skepticism is today invalidated, because there now exists a considerable body of reliable knowledge. Accordingly, it is meaningless to cast all claims to truth into a state of utter doubt. The same considerations apply to post-modernist subjectivism and Richard Rorty's pragmatic skepticism, which I believe are likewise mistaken.

Contrary to traditional skeptical doubts, there are methodological

criteria by which we are able to test claims to knowledge: (a) empirical tests based upon observation, (b) logical standards of coherence and consistency, and (c) experimental tests in which ideas are judged by their consequences. All of this is related to the proposition that it is possible to develop and use objective methods of inquiry in order to achieve reliable knowledge.

We can apply skeptical inquiry to many areas. Thoroughgoing investigations of paranormal claims can only be made by means of careful scientific procedures. Religious claims, using biblical criticism, the sciences of archaeology, linguistics, and history, have today given us a basis for skeptical criticism of the appeals to revelation and theories of special creation.

We have long since transcended cultural relativism in values and norms and are beginning to see the emergence of a global society. Thus extreme cultural subjectivity is no longer valid, for there is a basis for transcultural values. There is also a body of tested *prima facie* ethical principles and rules that may be generalizable to all human communities.

Therefore, the methods of skeptical inquiry can be applied to the political and economic domain in

which we frame judgments of practice. Indeed, it is possible to develop a *eupraxophy*, based on the most reliable knowledge of the day, to provide a generalized interpretation of the cosmos and some conceptions of the good life.

Doubt plays a vital role in the context of ongoing inquiry. It should, however, be selective, not unlimited, and contextual, not universal. The principle of fallibilism is relevant. We should not make absolute assertions, but be willing to admit that we may be mistaken. Our knowledge is based upon probabilities, which are reliable, not ultimate certainties or finalities.

Finally, skeptical inquirers should always be open-minded about new possibilities, unexpected departures in thought. They should always be willing to question or overturn even the most well-established principles in the light of further inquiry. The key principle of skeptical inquiry is to seek, when feasible, adequate evidence and reasonable grounds for any claim to truth in any context.

*Paul Kurtz is the founding Chairman of CSICOP and professor emeritus of philosophy at the State University of New York at Buffalo.*

## *Anthony Standen Dead at 86*

**A**nthony Standen, chemist, editor and scientific gadfly, died in June at 86. Author of *Science Is a Sacred Cow* (1950), an entertaining critique of scientific pomposity, Standen was sometimes considered the founder of the modern skeptics movement in science. However, Standen's writings could also be used by antievolutionists and opponents, not just critics, of science, since about the only fields he considered respectable were physics and math. He had degrees in chemistry and entomology.