The Myth of Consistent Skepticism
The Cautionary Case of Albert Einstein

Being a skeptic implies that we consistently apply the methods of skepticism to all claims. However, all skeptics, even Einstein, are, at best, selectively skeptical.

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Many readers of the *Skeptical Inquirer* (the authors included) have labeled or referred to ourselves as “skeptics,” which implies objectivity in our approach to evaluating various claims. However, we all have limitations and built-in biases that hinder our ability to apply the methods of skepticism objectively and consistently. Nonskeptics and professed skeptics alike are equally vulnerable to developing beliefs that have not been subjected to rigorous skeptical inquiry. Furthermore, skeptics (like nonskeptics) may refuse to change their viewpoints even in the face of substantial discrediting evidence.

Thus, skeptics would be well served to realize that we are selectively skeptical. Our purpose here is to (a) make clear why no consistent skeptic exists, (b) review the major biases that obstruct our ability to apply skepticism consistently, (c) provide a concrete example of selective skepticism in a great mind (Albert Einstein), and (d) challenge skeptics to reevaluate their own ability to apply the methods of skepticism consistently.

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### Does a ‘Consistent Skeptic’ Exist?

We are defining a “consistent skeptic” as an individual whose entire belief system is composed of beliefs that have been subjected to objective skeptical inquiry. Even those of us who claim to be skeptics are vulnerable to nonskeptically formed beliefs. This is because (a) we do not have time to evaluate every claim that becomes part of our belief system and may rely upon what is commonly believed or what we would like to be true; (b) we are more likely to perform a skeptical evaluation for claims that are inconsistent with our current belief systems (e.g., psychic powers), while simply accepting claims consistent with our beliefs (e.g., Einstein was a skeptic); (c) many beliefs are already formed and reinforced prior to learning how to think skeptically; (d) some beliefs are formed based primarily upon an emotional evaluation; and (e) skeptics have limited areas of expertise (e.g., a biologist may know little about economics), which restricts our ability to skeptically evaluate all potential claims because knowledge is extremely specialized.

Next, a “consistent skeptic” continually subjects his or her beliefs to possible modification based upon an objective evaluation of further evidence. While beliefs can be modified, research shows that we all possess biases that not only typically strengthen existing beliefs (both true and false), but often maintain beliefs in light of strong contradictory evidence. We will briefly discuss three relevant biases inhibiting consistent skepticism: the confirmation bias, biased assimilation, and belief perseverance (see Gilovich 1991 for further examples of how our cognitive systems can mislead us).

First, we all look for evidence that is consistent with our beliefs. In short, we tend to believe what we wish to be true, but we do so “objectively.” Specifically, we typically do not seek out discrediting evidence for our current beliefs with the same vigor that we look for supportive evidence (Gilovich 1991). Psychologists call this a confirmation bias (see Nickerson 1998 for a review). Confirmation bias has been demonstrated in a wide variety of contexts (e.g., stereotypes, political beliefs, financial decisions, beliefs in psychic abilities), and serves to strengthen current beliefs. Furthermore, the confirmation bias generates additional collateral “evidence,” allowing beliefs to persist even when the initial evidence is discredited, because we can draw on evidence obtained from a variety of sources. As a quick test of the confirmation bias, readers can look through their personal collections of books. Do you have an equal number of books that are both consistent and inconsistent with your beliefs? Do you subscribe to or read periodicals, newspapers, etc. that present perspectives contrary to your political beliefs? (The authors confess that their book collections and periodical and newspaper subscriptions are highly skewed in favor of their political beliefs.) Likewise, how do you feel about opposing political perspectives, especially concerning issues you are keenly interested in (e.g., the current Iraq war, school vouchers, privatization of Social Security accounts)? Do your feelings influence your assessment of the correctness of different perspectives? Likewise, are you surrounded primarily by others that share your views, which in turn strengthens your beliefs (i.e., group polarization)? A consistent skeptic would not be biased toward confirmatory evidence.

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Second, we are biased in assimilating information into our belief systems. Not only do we seek out information that supports our beliefs, but we also apply differing standards of evidence. As research has demonstrated, "People who hold strong opinions on complex social issues are likely to examine relevant empirical evidence in a biased manner. They are apt to accept 'confirming' evidence at face value while subjecting 'disconfirming' evidence to critical evaluation, and as a result to draw undue support for their initial positions from mixed or random empirical findings" (Lord, Ross, and Lepper 1979, p. 2098). A consistent skeptic would apply the methods of skepticism to all claims consistently and evaluate the evidence in an unbiased manner (i.e., without double standards).

Finally, many studies have demonstrated that it can be difficult to change a belief even when substantial discrediting information is provided (i.e., belief perseverance; see Anderson and Kellam 1992). This is especially true when we have constructed a rationale supporting the belief, or for strongly held emotional beliefs (Edwards 1990). Belief perseverance explains why a "true believer" (e.g., Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who believed that mediums could communicate with spirits) continues to maintain beliefs despite powerful discrediting evidence (e.g., Harry Houdini’s exposure of mediums as frauds or confessions by the mediums). Furthermore, research by Tetlock (1998, 1999) has shown that experts also go to great lengths to maintain belief systems, even in the face of strong evidence that should force them to reconsider viewpoints. A consistent skeptic should obviously use discrediting information to modify beliefs.

Not only do we lack the time and universal expertise to be consistent skeptics, but our minds have a variety of built-in biases that directly hinder nonselective skepticism. These biases are especially powerful in defending long-held beliefs in which we have a strong emotional investment. Even the most ardent skeptic does not like to have his or her most cherished beliefs subjected to rigorous skeptical inquiry.

**Albert Einstein: A Selective Skeptic**

Albert Einstein’s scientific contributions, like those of Charles Darwin or Isaac Newton, have shaped the way we view the universe. Einstein had a great mathematical mind, and has become a scientific icon. Einstein, most likely because of his scientific achievements, was voted one of the ten outstanding scientists of the twentieth century by the Fellows and Scientific Consultants of CSICOP (see Skeptical Inquirer, January/February 2000). However, Einstein was no skeptic when evaluating evidence outside of his field of expertise. As skeptics are well aware, scientists sometimes look foolish when venturing outside of their disciplines.

Einstein held a wide range of beliefs beyond his contributions to science and outside his area of expertise. For example, in 1933, Einstein (we believe correctly) voiced his opinion about political liberty in Germany, “As long as I have any choice, I will only stay in a country where political liberty, toleration, and equality of all citizens before the law are the rule. Political liberty implies liberty to express one’s political views orally and in writ-
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Albert Einstein”) in Hook’s (1987) autobiography, Out of Step: An Unquiet Life in the Twentieth Century. The chapter relies heavily upon letters exchanged between the two men, and reading the chapter in its entirety provides a much richer context than the brief summary we provide here.

Einstein, a professed believer in political liberty, virtually refuses to criticize the Soviet government and justifies the murders and creation of slave labor camps. The closest Einstein comes to criticism of the Soviet government is contained in the first sentence of the following quote. However, the next sentence speaks for itself. According to Einstein in 1948, “I am not blind to the serious weaknesses of the Russian system of government and I would not like to live under such government. But it has, on the other side, great merits and it is difficult to decide whether it would have been possible for the Russians to survive by following softer methods” (Einstein quoted in Hook, 1987, p. 476).

Hook responded with a lengthy letter, pointing out many inconsistencies in Einstein’s reasoning when it came to the Soviet Union:

Precisely what methods have you in mind? I am puzzled on what evidence anyone can assert that cultural purges and terror in astronomy, biology, art, music, literature, the social sciences, helped the Russians to survive, or how the millions of victims in concentration camps of the Soviet Union, not to speak of the wholesale executions, contributed in any way to the Russian

Einstein did not respond to Hook’s letter. We would have expected some reply, at least claiming that Einstein was misunderstood. However, other writings by Einstein indicate that he believed, for the Russian people, “a painful temporary renunciation of his personal independence” was necessary and that Einstein himself would have “deemed it my duty to make this temporary sacrifice” (Einstein quoted in Hook, 1987, p. 476). Thus, for the Soviet people, Einstein abandons his own views about political liberty (a clear double standard). Max Born (1971) also found Einstein’s views toward the Soviet Union “hard to reconcile” (p. 131). Hook (1987) summarizes that he “was mystified by Einstein’s failure to come to grips with the revelations of the victims of Stalin’s terror” (p. 478). Unfortunately, Einstein was not alone, as many intellectuals, perhaps attracted to the lofty goals of communism, refused to acknowledge the devastating actions of the Soviet government (Sowell 1996).

Einstein does not demonstrate the hallmarks of a consistent skeptic when it comes to his evaluation of the Soviet Union. It is doubtful that anyone committed to rigorous skepticism would agree with Einstein’s view that a government has the right to murder millions of its own citizens and create slave labor camps as a preemptive strategy if it believes it will be attacked at some future date. Interestingly, Einstein judged the German people to be “the land of mass-murderers” (Einstein quoted in Born 1971, p. 199) and the individual citizen personally responsible for the crimes of the Nazi regime. However, by this standard, Einstein himself would have felt it justified if he was murdered for “correct” political reasons, or himself part of a land of mass-murderers if he lived in the Soviet Union under Stalin. The great irony is that Stalin’s government, like Hitler’s, murdered millions of its own citizens and did not tolerate political liberty. Only a “true believer” could not make that assessment.

We encourage readers to compare Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s justifications for maintaining his beliefs in spiritualism (see chapter 9 of Houdini: A Magician Among the Spirits) with Einstein’s justifications of Soviet government actions. Both men, when dealing with subjects outside of their expertise, abandoned basic logic, created double standards to evaluate evidence, and did not modify their beliefs in response to overwhelming new evidence.

Einstein’s placement in the list of ten outstanding skeptics of the twentieth century itself is an example of selective skepticism. Note that this evaluation was not made by a single individual, but was a cumulative effort by the top skeptics of today. We would be interested to know whether those who voted for Einstein (or for readers who subsequently accepted this belief) simply relied upon what is commonly believed about Einstein or whether a true skeptical inquiry was performed. Of course, we are most interested in whether the information presented in this article would cause those who believe that Einstein was an outstanding skeptic to reconsider that belief.
Summary and Implications

No one is once and for all a skeptic. Skepticism is an ongoing, self-correcting process, not an end to be achieved. It is continually possible to not only backslide but to apply our skepticism inconsistently. We are all selective skeptics. Ironically, calling ourselves skeptics may make us less skeptical in objectively evaluating claims because it may create a false sense of our willingness to subject all of our beliefs to the principles of inquiry. Self-knowledge concerning our limitations is useful in two ways: it encourages intellectual humility and honesty and it keeps the daunting task of not falling prey to our particular certainties forthrightly in view.

The case of Einstein is cautionary in another respect. Too often, we find skeptics paying rapt attention to the views of scientific celebrities regarding assorted topics to which those celebrities’ occupational expertise and accomplishments are totally irrelevant. From a logical point of view, what a renowned physicist, astronomer, or evolutionary biologist has to say about psychology, politics, economics, religion, etc., has no special status whatsoever (just like the Hollywood celebrity who speaks out on these issues). Scientists’ claims regarding these issues must stand on their logical and substantive merits alone. Too often, the irrelevancy of scientific celebrity is lost on those who (like all of us) love to be told what they want to hear, especially by people famous for their intellectual accomplishments. Yet, the love of misplaced authority is but another step in the direction of obliviousness to our own selective skepticism.

Simply calling ourselves skeptics is no guarantee that we will objectively apply the methods of skepticism. Self-awareness that we have limitations in expertise combined with built-in biases that hinder our consistent application of skepticism may help to minimize our own selective skepticism. However, if we ignore our own selective skepticism and inconsistently apply the method of skepticism, we run the risk, like Einstein, of deluding ourselves in certain areas like the “true believer” that every skeptical despises.

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References