

# Skepticism is True

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*Skepticism is True*

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To Rachel and Uri

# Acknowledgment

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# **Chapter 1:**

## **Formulating Skepticism**

This book deals with epistemology and the philosophy of science. I am assuming that the reader is familiar with the main problems in these fields. However, no great expertise is required, but only a basic familiarity, such as can be acquired by reading an introductory book.

This book is not scholarly. I will refrain from scholarly surveys of the literature in the epistemology and philosophy of science. I have nothing against learned books, but my view is that in many cases there is a tradeoff between scholarship, on the one hand, and ease of reading on the other. This book is designed for those readers who prefer ease of reading.

The main theses of this book are:

1. All statements are neither certain nor plausible. In other words: skepticism is true.
2. Skepticism, as formulated above, does not imply any absurd conclusions (in contrast to the view commonly held by philosophers).
3. People do not choose their beliefs. What we believe is determined by psychological processes.
4. People believe in statements that minimize the extent of the unexpected events of which they are aware.

I will argue in favor of the first thesis, that skepticism is true, throughout the book. In Chapter 1, I will present my own formulation of skepticism. In Chapter 2, I will survey the arguments alleged against skepticism in order to defend the second thesis, namely, that skepticism is not paradoxical. The discussion will leave open the question as to the psychological processes that determine what one believes. I will address this question in Chapter 3, where I will also present the third and fourth theses. Finally, in chapter 4 I will present applications to the problem of demarcation between science and not science and to computerized learning.



# Defining Skepticism

Like many other philosophical terms, skepticism has been defined in several different ways. Accordingly, I would like to begin the discussion with a definition of skepticism.

Skepticism is defined here as the position according to which *all* statements are doubtful. Consider, for example, such statements as "The sun will rise tomorrow," "There are trees," or "Julius Caesar was the emperor of Rome." Usually they are considered to be doubtless. My own position, however, is quite the opposite. I claim that all statements, even those like the above-mentioned three, are doubtful.

More precisely, I define skepticism as the position according to which the terms "certainty," "plausibility," "corroboration," and "justification" - insofar as their epistemological meanings are concerned - do not apply to statements. In other words, statements cannot be certain, plausible, corroborated, or justified.

My position is that the terms "certainty," "plausibility," "corroboration" and "justification" - insofar as their epistemological meanings are concerned - are as empty as the concept of the unicorn. There are no certain, plausible, corroborated, or justified statements, in the same sense that there are no unicorns.

I cannot *prove* that this position is true (nor can I prove that there are no unicorns). But I believe that I can *rationally convince* that skepticism is true. I

will not put forward new arguments in favor of skepticism. My strategy will be to present defensive arguments refuting the common view that skepticism is absurd. Most philosophers are convinced that skepticism is absurd. Contrary to this view, I will argue in the following chapters that skepticism does not imply any absurd results.

## **Phyron, Descartes and Hume**

The history of skepticism starts with Phyronism, in ancient Greek philosophy. There is no written evidence attesting to Phyron's position, but, following Sextus Empiricus, the prevalent view of it is as follows: One who wishes to be in a peaceful mood (*ataraxia*) should try to doubt every position that he or she considers. As a result of these doubts, one will refrain from assuming any position, and the outcome will be a state of peacefulness. This view is a recommendation for a skeptical way of life, in which the skeptic neither denies nor approves statements about the world.

In modern western philosophy Descartes evoked the discussion about skepticism by the so-called “evil spirit hypothesis.” This is the hypothesis that all my beliefs were created and controlled by an evil spirit. (In modern terms this hypothesis is presented as the possibility that I am a brain-in-a-vat controlled by a computer). Descartes tried to answer this kind of skepticism by his famous Cogito (Since I cannot imagine that I do not exist, I know that I

exist, and on the basis of this knowledge I can go on and restore my knowledge about the world). Other philosophers, both Rationalists and Empiricists suggested other epistemological principles of answering skepticism.

The philosopher who is mostly associated with skepticism is Hume. He claimed that all our beliefs about the external world, except for immediate experience, are doubtful since there is no rational principle that entails these beliefs. Among the many arguments for skepticism he presented the most famous one refers to induction. The fact the sun has rose every morning till today does not entail that it will rise tomorrow, and therefore the statement “the sun will rise tomorrow” is doubtful. Contrary to most of the other philosophers he did not try to refute skepticism on epistemological grounds. Rather he claimed that we are saved from Pyrronism, because we are forced to believe in what we believe as a result of psychological principles. The main theses of this book are very similar to Hume’s.

## **Conventional Epistemologism**

Western philosophy has been dealing with skepticism throughout the entire span of its history. Skepticism was discussed in ancient Greek philosophy and is one of the main issues in contemporary discussions in the fields of epistemology and philosophy of science.

Almost all philosophers in these fields have assumed that there are criteria, according to which statements such as "the sun will rise tomorrow" are certain, or at least plausible. The search after such criteria is ongoing but, as a matter of fact, no one has yet found any that can withstand criticism. Hundreds of philosophers throughout history have claimed that they have found a decisive rebuttal of skepticism, but all the criteria proffered on behalf of certainty or plausibility have been refuted by "paradoxes" and other counter-examples. I will not here survey the literature in this field, since it includes an enormous number of books and essays in epistemology and the philosophy of science. I am assuming that the reader is familiar with the literature (at least at an introductory level) and agrees that, as a matter of fact, no criterion of certainty or plausibility that survives criticism has been discovered to date.

Yet, in spite of the fact that no conclusive answer to skepticism has ever been offered, most philosophers are convinced that skepticism is absurd. Throughout history skepticism has suffered an ignoble reputation. Very few philosophers have been willing to declare that they are skeptics. Most philosophers have considered skepticism as a position that can be presented as an alleged position only. They have argued not against human skeptics but imaginary ones, and the presupposition has been that these imaginary skeptics are wrong. They have assumed that those who seriously doubt that the sun will rise tomorrow, or that there are trees, or that Julius Caesar was the emperor of Rome, are either

ignorant or lunatic. They have not asked “is skepticism true?” but presupposed that it is not, and on the basis of this presupposition they have gone on their quest for “the right answer to skepticism,” or, namely, “how can we prove that the skeptic is wrong?”

The lowly status of skepticism can perhaps explain why the position, which maintains that skepticism is wrong, has no name. Philosophers are name collectors, and almost any position, even if represented by only a negligible minority of the profession, is usually accorded the distinction of a name. The denial of skepticism is an exception to this rule. As stated, the denial of skepticism has no name. There are many positions regarding the right answer to skepticism, and each of them has its own name: Rationalism, Empiricism, Positivism, etc. However, the conglomeration of all these positions, namely, the unified stance that skepticism is false, has no name. Apparently, one could claim that Dogmatism is the denial of skepticism. However, Dogmatism is not the name of a school of philosophical thought, but rather a token of scorn.

I believe that the explanation is as follows: Positions do not have names when they are not disputed. For example, the position that there are trees has no name, since it is not disputed. No one sincerely claims that there are no trees. The same applies to the position that skepticism is false. As mentioned above, almost all philosophers have been sure that this position is obviously true. So the denial of skepticism is not disputed, and as a result it has no name.

As already stated, my position is quite the opposite. I believe that skepticism is true, and so I need a name for the denial of skepticism. I have chosen to name this position "Conventional Epistemologism." Conventional Epistemologism, then, is the position that skepticism is false. Rationalism, Empiricism, Positivism, and even Popperianism, are all classified here as different kinds of Conventional Epistemologism.

I feel uncomfortable presenting this position. I hate to be in a situation in which I disagree with the majority of philosophers. Fortunately, I am not alone. I believe that my skepticism is close to that of Hume. The position that will be presented here is by no means *identical* with Hume's skepticism, but to a large degree my own view of skepticism can be understood as an interpretation and evolution of Hume's.

## Certainty vs. Plausibility

Before presenting my arguments I would like to clarify a few points.

First, when I say that all statements are doubtful, my position can be interpreted in one of two ways:

1. No statement is certain.
2. No statement is plausible, corroborated, justified, etc.

Here I present the second, and stronger, position.

For ages, from the ancient days of Greek philosophy until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most philosophers understood "skepticism" along the lines of the first interpretation, namely, that a statement is doubtful as long as it is not certain. The main question discussed was: what can we know with certainty? The presupposition was that the skeptic was wrong, or, namely, that there are indeed statements that we can know with certainty. So the questions asked were: what is the criterion for certainty, and what is the right answer to the skeptic, who doubts statements that are considered to be certain? Plausibility was not enough. One who claimed that the existence of God, for example, is not certain but just plausible would have been considered an atheist. Indeed there were some discussions about plausibility, but they were exceptional. Most discussions interpreted skepticism as the position according to which statements that most people consider to be doubtless are not certain.

This interpretation of skepticism ceased to be effectual when it was discovered that scientific theories could not be proved. Allegedly a scientific theory can be proved empirically, but any such proof is inductive, and today most philosophers agree that we cannot arrive at certainty by induction from empirical observations. Though we may observe, for example, many ravens, and note that in all cases they are black, we cannot conclude from these premises that the sentence "the next raven will be black" is certain.

This discovery, that scientific theories cannot be certain, was perfectly consonant with skepticism, according to which statements like "the sun will rise tomorrow" are not certain. However, in order to avoid a victory on behalf of skepticism, a new concept of doubt has been introduced. According to this new concept, a doubtless statement like "the sun will rise tomorrow" is not certain but just very *plausible*.

This position is the regnant position in contemporary epistemology. According to this position, certainty obtains only in the fields of logic and mathematics. Statements about the empirical world, such as "the sun will rise tomorrow," cannot be certain but at most plausible, corroborated, or justified.

My own position is that all statements are neither certain nor plausible, corroborated, or justified.

Note that my position is stronger than Fallibilism. Fallibilism is the position that any belief about the world might be discovered to be false. This position, associated mainly with Peirce and Popper states that no statement about the world is certain. But it does not logically entail the stronger position, that no statement is plausible, corroborated or justified. And indeed, Peirce claims that the process of knowledge seeking reduces doubt, and Popper argues that although theories cannot be corroborated they can still be *implausible* when refuted by empirical observations.

A semantic note: in what follows I shall not distinguish among the concepts of plausibility, corroboration, and justification. The concept of



"plausibility" will represent the other two as well. Perhaps a distinction among these concepts could be made, but even so, it is not relevant to our discussion.

## **Total vs. Limited Skepticism**

A second point that I would like to clarify is that I am not claiming that all statements have the same degree of plausibility. Rather, my position is that statements cannot be plausible at all. I distinguish between the following two positions:

1. Statements can be plausible, but all statements have the same degree of plausibility.
2. Statements cannot be plausible.

I agree that the first position is absurd. However, here I am presenting the second position, and, in reference to this position, I shall claim that it does not yield any absurd implications. In other words, I am not saying that statements such as "the sun will rise tomorrow" and "the sun will *not* rise tomorrow" have the same degree of plausibility. Rather, I am claiming that these two statements are both not plausible, since plausibility does not apply to statements.

As a consequence my position is one of *total* skepticism. According to my skepticism, *all* statements are doubtful. When I say "all," I include

not only statements about the empirical world but statements in the fields of logic and mathematics as well. Since "certainty" and "plausibility" do not apply to statements, then no statement, regardless of its content, can be certain or plausible.

This is a crucial point, since it distinguishes between my formulation of skepticism and other skeptical positions that have been presented in earlier philosophical literature. Most discussions in the philosophical literature refer to skepticism that is limited to a certain field. One such example of limited skepticism is the position according to which all scientific theories are doubtful, but there are empirical facts that are doubtless. This kind of skepticism is represented by a generalization, since it refers to *all* the scientific theories, but the generalization is limited to one field, in this case that of scientific theories. My position, however, is formulated using a generalization that is not limited to one field. I claim that since "certainty" and "plausibility" do not apply to statements, all statements are doubtful.

As mentioned, this point accentuates the difference between my own position and other skeptical positions that have been presented in the philosophical literature. Among the few philosophers that have argued on behalf of skepticism, most have limited themselves to skepticism in reference to the empirical world. For example, some of them have claimed that all *empirical* statements are doubtful, in contrast to statements in logic or mathematics and statements that result from immediate experience. Such a

position implies that the statements in logic or mathematics and the statements that result from immediate experience are certain or at least plausible, while I claim that there are no such certain or plausible statements.

This point applies to Hume as well. Hume's skeptical position was *almost* total skepticism, but contrary to total skepticism he did not apply skepticism to immediate reports of experience, nor beliefs that are based on simple intuitive mathematical or logical theorems. In this point my position differs from Hume's. As mentioned, I claim that all the statements are doubtful, including immediate reports of experience and including mathematical and logical statements.

## Meaningfulness

Third, I am not claiming that the terms "certainty," "plausibility," "corroboration," "justification," etc., are meaningless.

Many philosophers have tried to solve classical problems by claiming that the terms in which these problems are formulated are meaningless. I myself do not intend to take this path. People quite often use sentences in which the terms "certainty," "plausibility," "corroboration," "justification," etc. are applied to statements, and I do not believe that such extensive use can be meaningless. Again, I would like to present the unicorn analogy. My position is that the terms being discussed, in their

epistemological sense, have meaning but do not apply to statements, in the same way that the term "unicorn" has meaning even though there are no unicorns in the real world.

## **Probability**

Fourth, my position does not refer to probability. When I claim that no statement is plausible, I am referring to plausibility and not to probability. The distinction between these two terms is that "plausibility" applies to statements, whereas "probability" applies to events.

One could disagree with the above distinction, claiming that the plausibility of a statement is equivalent to the probability of the event described by this statement. Consider, for example, the statement "It will rain tomorrow." One could claim that since there is a certain probability that it will rain tomorrow, this probability is what determines the plausibility of the statement "It will rain tomorrow." The higher the probability of the event, i.e. rain tomorrow, the more plausible is the statement "It will rain tomorrow."

My answer is as follows: The probability of an event is not equal to the plausibility of the statement that describes this event, since events occur in time while statements do not. Consider the statement "Yesterday it was raining." Assuming for the sake of the argument that plausibility can be applied to statements, we could ask: what is the plausibility of

this statement? But the question regarding the probability of the event signified by the statement "Yesterday it was raining" is meaningless. Probability applies only to events that have not yet occurred. It cannot be applied to events that either did or did not occur.

## **Epistemology vs. Psychology**

Fifth, my position refers to epistemology. It does not refer to psychology.

The concept of doubt has two meanings, one epistemological and the other psychological. When one says "I doubt whether the sun will rise tomorrow," the sentence can be interpreted in one of two ways:

1. The epistemological interpretation: One believes that the statement "The sun will rise tomorrow" is doubtful. What is doubtful is the statement.
2. The psychological interpretation: One is not sure whether the sun will rise tomorrow. One is doubtful about the tomorrow sunrise.

The first interpretation refers to the epistemological status of the statement "The sun will rise tomorrow," while the second interpretation refers to the psychological state of the speaker.

Skepticism is presented here in accordance with the epistemological interpretation. I am referring to the epistemological status of statements rather than the psychological state of people.

I will not deny that sometimes one is certain of something or doubtful about something else. Of course, there are cases in which one is in the psychological state of being certain, and there are other cases in which one is in the psychological state of doubtfulness. What I am denying is that statements can be certain or plausible.

Let me clarify this point. Consider the following two sentences:

1. I am sure that the sun will rise tomorrow.
2. I am doubtful as to whether Lee Harvey Oswald assassinated John F. Kennedy by himself.

Both sentences describe psychological states, one of being certain in the first sentence, and one of doubtfulness in the second. They do not describe the epistemological status of the statements "The sun will rise tomorrow" and "Lee Harvey Oswald assassinated John F. Kennedy by himself."

Now consider the following sentences:

3. The statement "The sun will rise tomorrow" is doubtless.
4. The statement "Lee Oswald assassinated Kennedy by himself" is doubtful.

These two sentences refer to the epistemological status of the statements. They do not refer to the psychological state of the speaker making the statements.

Therefore, the following position is logically consistent:

5. I am sure (psychologically) that the sun will rise tomorrow, and I believe that the statement "The sun will rise tomorrow" is (epistemologically) doubtful.

This is the position presented in this book.

The philosophical literature has dealt mainly with epistemological skepticism. When the rationalist and the empiricist ask "what one can know?" they are dealing with the epistemological question "which statements are doubtless?" They are not dealing with the psychological question "what are the statements that people are certain of?" The present book is in line with this tradition. As stated, my thesis refers to the epistemological rather than the psychological question.

Note, however, that the above-mentioned doctrine of Pyrronism, in ancient Greek philosophy, can be interpreted as a position that refers to psychological skepticism. As mentioned, Pyrronism is the view that one who wishes to be in a peaceful mood (*ataraxia*) should try to doubt every position that he or she considers. As a result of these doubts, one will refrain from assuming any position, and the outcome will be a state of peacefulness. This view is a recommendation for a

skeptical way of life, in which the skeptic neither denies nor approves statements about the world. It follows that Phyron was not dealing with the same problem that has bothered western epistemologists ever since Descartes. According to this interpretation, Phyron, like many other Greek philosophers, dealt with the psychological problem, namely, how one could live peacefully, while western epistemologists have been dealing with the epistemological problem, namely, finding a criterion for doubtless statements. Here I refer to the epistemological problem (although the psychological problem may be more important) and my answer, as mentioned above, is that all statements are epistemologically doubtful.

## Summary

My main position is that the concepts "certainty" and "plausibility," in their epistemological sense, do not apply to statements. There are no certain or plausible statements, in the same sense that there are no unicorns. Therefore, there are no statements that are doubtless.

This is a radical skeptical position. To demonstrate its radicalism I mention the following points:

1. Contrary to the classical view, according to which skepticism refers to certainty alone, I refer to plausibility, corroboration, and justification as well.



I claim that all statements are neither certain nor plausible (corroborated, justified, etc.).

2. Contrary to the classical view, according to which skepticism is limited to certain fields (skepticism in reference to the senses, skepticism in reference to the sciences, etc.), my skepticism is not limited. I claim that all statements, including statements in logic and mathematics, are doubtful.

My position is limited, however, to epistemology. I will not deny that one can be psychologically confident that certain statements are true. I do deny that there are statements that are epistemologically certain or plausible.