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# A skeptical defense of skepticism

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This paper is a restatement and development of some of the arguments in defense of skepticism as an epistemological position that I explored in Allwood (2013). I first review some of the reasons for becoming a skeptic, and, secondly, I briefly present my version of a skeptical epistemology. Thirdly, I review some of the counter arguments against skepticism and fourthly, I attempt to answer these arguments by introducing the concepts of trust and conviction as complementary concepts to certainty and knowledge.

## Why should we be skeptical – uncertain?

A very basic reason for uncertainty about what the world is like, is that the world, as far as we can understand, is far richer in information than any single human being can comprehend and probably also richer in information than we collectively as humans can comprehend. This means that on reflection, we can become aware that there are usually many possibilities of interpretation of our claims and our experiences of the world. Our ability and willingness to exercise our faculty of interpretation will influence how aware we are of these possibilities and it will also influence our willingness to make claims of certain knowledge. Awareness of alternative possibilities is characteristic of a skeptic, who because of this awareness eventually, in all situations, becomes uncertain about what the right interpretation is, but still manages to continue an active life.

The need for enlightened skepticism has become greater because of the increasing availability of ready-made information claimed to be true. This situation has become more urgent, even worse, especially through the internet, with the arrival of the so called “knowledge society”, where “trolling” and “fake news” have added confusion to the already rich flora and fauna of information claimed to be true. If we turn to science for guidance, we will find that on many, perhaps most issues, (if we look deeply enough), there will be disagreement and so, in the end, we still have to exercise our own judgement. On most issues, the availability of information has meant that there is very much, often far too much, so that we have to form our opinion based on only part of the information that exists. No one really has an overview of all of science any more, and the lack of overview is unfortunately also increasingly true of the situation within single scientific specialities and disciplines.

The question is if reacting with uncertainty and skepticism to this situation prevents most of us from acting purposefully and continuing our lives. In our daily lives we are constantly confronted with uncertainties concerning the past, present and future but still seem to manage to continue our lives quite well. The question is how we do this.

Dogmatic persons (“dogmatic” is the classical skeptical term for a person who claims to have certain knowledge) will say they can do this because they have certain knowledge about how the world functions in many respects. A skeptic does not make this claim but still manages to believe that he/she can live and act purposefully. In this paper, I discuss some of the reasons for why this is possible.

## A skeptical epistemology

In keeping with philosophical tradition, I will define “knowledge” as “true, justified belief” and “certainty” as “an attitude we have when we think there is no counter evidence to what we believe”. Even if there is no necessary link between “certainty” and “knowledge” (see Allwood, 2013), empirically, they often go together, and skeptics usually have difficulties with claiming any of the two. Given that the traditional normative requirements for “knowledge” are “belief”, “justification” and “truth”, the problem for a skeptic is that while we can often give good justification for our beliefs, “truth” in the sense of “correspondence between our beliefs and reality” is much harder to ascertain and recognize.

An ancient response to this difficulty (already suggested by Socrates, (cf. Plato 1892)), is to become a skeptic with regard to knowledge. The most classic kind of skepticism holds that we can only know one thing, namely that “we cannot know anything”. This position is often called “academic skepticism”, since it was the view of knowledge propagated in the Platonic academy by some of the philosophers succeeding Plato. “Academic skepticism” was criticized by Pyrrho from Elis, and following him, also by his disciples, such as Sextos Empiricos (from whose books we have much of our information concerning the learning of antiquity) for not being skeptical enough (see Patrick, 2006 and Beckwith, 2015). An important part of their criticism is simple and goes as follows – How do academic skeptics know that they do not know anything? Might it not be the case that some of the beliefs for which they have justification, also happen to be true and that they therefore have knowledge. For this reason, Pyrrho and Sextos Empiricos advocated being more humble, accepting uncertainty and suspending judgement. In fact, they claimed that if we learn to accept uncertainty, we can reach “ataraxia”, a state of mind that can be characterized as acceptance of uncertainty combined with “freedom from doubt”, a state of mind that allows us to actively live in the world with an inquisitive and open mind.

In line with this (unfortunately not always sufficiently well- known and understood) type of skepticism, I would like to suggest that Pyrrho's argument given above, is still basically correct today and that we should in general be satisfied with “justified belief” rather than certain “knowledge”. This, of course, does not mean that “anything goes” and that we can lazily relax and stop caring about the correctness of our beliefs. On the contrary, good justification of belief can involve all of scientific methodology and its goals. What we believe is a correct theory should therefore be not only “true” but also “consistent”, “exhaustive”, “perspicuous”, “economic” and “fruitful”. In fact, believing in these goals are a presupposition of skepticism. If there were no such goals, there would be nothing to be skeptical and uncertain about.

As aids in pursuing knowledge and truth in this sense, we can use the means traditionally recommended in science, i.e. observation (direct experience and clear evidential intuition) and inductive methods based on observation as well as deduction and analysis, combined more indirectly with reliance on the authorities, that we believe have reason to trust, i.e. reliance on trustworthy sources. Yet skepticism means that we feel that most, if not all of the goals connected with the search for truth, especially the two goals—“correspondence truth” and “exhaustiveness”, have so far probably not actually been attained, by science.

But as skeptics, we are and we should also be skeptical of skepticism and ask whether and how we know for certain that the goals of searching for truth "truth, consistence, exhaustiveness" etc. are adequate and correct. On what basis can we claim that our normative view of the criteria for knowledge is correct?

We then have to admit that they are based on very strong intuitions and beliefs, rather than on absolute knowledge. Given our reliance on language, concepts, judgements, propositions and linguistic means like statements, in the search for truth, the criteria seem to be presuppositions and maybe default assumptions of arriving at correct, coherent and complete descriptions and explanations of different aspects of reality.

Presupposing a shared reality, in which we can all individually as well as collaboratively and cooperatively search for truth in the sense of correspondence with this reality and also argue about what is true and correct for all of us, seems to be a presupposition not only of skepticism, but of all collaborative human truth aspiring discourse. This distinguishes skepticism from truth relativism, which in some versions seems to allow for humans living in different worlds, and for claims made about the same thing being both true and false. Skepticism instead is pursuing an absolute notion of truth, in harmony with the classical laws of identity, non-contradiction and possibly also the excluded middle, e.g., holding that a claim about some particular state of affairs should normally be true or false and cannot be both true and false.

Through this analysis, we, thus, join the list of seekers of the presuppositions of experience and knowledge (e.g. Kant (1781) and Husserl (1913)), and communication (Grice (1975) and Allwood (1976)) and suggest that "truth, consistence, exhaustiveness, economy, perspicuity and fruitfulness" should be added to the list of presuppositions for making correct judgements, descriptions and explanations in scientific and other coherent accounts of reality.

However, we do not agree with the Kantian claims about the necessity of the results of a "transcendental deduction" of presuppositions (cf. Kant 1781). In line with skepticism, we realize that laying bare presuppositions of knowledge is no guarantee for the transcendental necessity of these presuppositions. Over and above the self-referential (claims about the criteria for truth seeking have to themselves meet these criteria) and overall coherence of the suggested epistemology, in the end, the criteria are essentially based on very strong intuitions and beliefs.

In addition to interpreting the goals as presuppositions of knowledge, I suggest that we also interpret them as regulative ideals (in the Kantian sense (cf. Kant 1781)), i.e. as goals towards which we strive in science and other coherent accounts of reality. As truth seekers, we are pursuing truth, consistence, exhaustiveness, but as skeptics, we have so far not been convinced that we have fully attained these goals. We recognize that all beliefs, including the ones for which we have good justification, could be shown to be wrong and should therefore be open to revision. This comes close to the epistemological position which, following Peirce (1981) and Popper (1974), sometimes is known as "fallibilism".

Realizing that we are "living with uncertainty", thus, fosters an attitude of humility and open inquisitiveness. We don't have information about everything and we might be wrong about what we think we know. One way to live with this attitude is "to be more skeptical than most people about that which most experts believe is certain" and "to be somewhat less skeptical (i.e. also be skeptical of skepticism) and therefore be more open to listening to (without necessarily believing) less conventionally accepted views like astrology, homeopathy or anthropology that are dismissed by most people, including experts".

This way of living with uncertainty, which we might call "epistemic humility" is not incompatible with argumentative forcefulness. Thus, in the face of opposition, we might well try to

defend our justified beliefs as strongly as possible, in order to have them tested by good counter arguments, all the while being ready to change our views if the arguments presented are better than our own (cf. Popper, 1974).

Epistemic humility also has ethical consequences. It fosters an attitude of tolerance. It is mostly wise to give the other party the “benefit of the doubt”. If we are bent towards utilitarian ethics and believe that the actions that are ethically most desirable are the actions that have the maximally best consequences, epistemic humility can help us accept that the calculation of the consequences of most actions is a complex affair - so complex that in everyday life, living with uncertainty probably requires another ethical approach. In the end, perhaps intuition and good intentions (Kant, 1964) together with an uncertain estimate of consequences are the best guides we can hope for.

## Some arguments against skepticism

Let us now briefly consider three of the (“dogmatic”) arguments against skepticism.

- (i) Skepticism is blatantly false because we know many things with certainty, like what our name is, that the sun will rise tomorrow, that we have a hand or that God has created the universe.
- (ii) Skepticism is self-defeating, since if skeptics don’t know anything this should include not knowing and being uncertain that skepticism is correct.
- (iii) Skeptics should not be able to survive. Having knowledge is necessary for survival. Meaningful and purposeful action in the world presupposes certain knowledge of the world.

Above we have already touched on most of the skeptical replies to these arguments.

Concerning the first argument, you become a skeptic precisely because on reflection you realize that you are not certain about phenomena like the ones exemplified. You realize that there are other possibilities, that though perhaps unlikely, cannot be totally excluded.

Concerning the second argument - it is correct, but not a reason to abandon skepticism since no other epistemology has a stronger position. If anything, because of self-delusion, these positions are even more uncertain.

The next section will be devoted to discussing and answering the third argument

## Is it possible to live with uncertainty and still act purposefully in the world?

In discussing the third argument, which can also be rendered by the questions: “Is it possible to live with uncertainty and still act purposefully in the world?” and “How can you act if you are not certain of anything?”, I will consider two replies.

The first reply is that perhaps an attitude of what might be called “brave pessimism” or alternatively “skeptical optimism” might be recommended. Before carrying out a desired action, we inform ourselves of believed risks but realize that since these beliefs are uncertain, we can still act by falling back on our intuitions with a certain readiness for possible trouble. As we shall see below, this attitude can be supported by the second reply.

The second reply involves a separation between the concepts of "trust" and "conviction", on the one hand and "certainty" and "knowledge", on the other (see also Allwood, 2014).

We will define "trust" as a socio-emotional epistemic attitude involving belief/faith/reliance in the expected positive/ optimal function/behavior of whom/what is trusted (Allwood, 2014).

Since trust is not knowledge but rather expectation, belief and faith, it is compatible with uncertainty and doubt. We can trust even if we don't know. We can trust without an intellectual examination and act on the basis of this trust. We can trust many things, like our intuitions, or that the floor or ground we are walking on is stable and solid, without being certain or having knowledge that our intuitions are correct or that the floor or ground is really stable and solid. "Trust" is a more primitive and basic notion than "certainty" and "knowledge", which both are the result of justification and reflection in trying to describe or explain something. Trust is an intuitive default expectation, guiding action independently of justification and reflection, description, explanation and planning. We can act on the basis of trust without certainty and knowledge. The question of certainty and knowledge does not have to arise. In fact, this explains and justifies why we (perhaps always) act without certainty. Trust replaces certainty in practical life. In this way, trust enables, facilitates and simplifies life and action.

Trust is negated by distrust and mistrust rather than by uncertainty and doubt. We act on trust until we encounter a reason for lack of trust or mis-/distrust. Reasons for uncertainty and doubt and causes or reasons for distrust do not have to be the same. Distrust is more directly connected to action than uncertainty and doubt which are connected to judgement. Thus, the criteria for trust, lack of trust, mis-/distrust are not the same as the criteria for certainty and knowledge, lack of knowledge or epistemic doubt.

However, just as for certainty and knowledge, there are degrees and types of trust and it is therefore an interesting challenge and task to try to articulate the criteria for different types and degrees of trust. Some help in doing this can perhaps be found by considering the reasons, motives, purposes and functions of trust (see Allwood, 2014). For further discussion of criteria of trust, see Goldman (2001) or Govier (1998) where several factors that justify trust are discussed.

In answering the question of how survival and action is possible for a skeptic, I would also like, besides trust, to introduce the concept of "conviction" as a complementary concept to "certainty" and "knowledge". The term "conviction" can have at least two meanings; a legal sense and a non-legal sense. We are concerned with the non-legal sense of the term and will define "conviction" as a "deep strongly felt belief with a certain permanence which is not so easily changed or influenced by argument". Just like "trust", "conviction" is an emotional-epistemic attitude and a pragmatic concept more directly linked to action than "knowledge" and "certainty".

Convictions can be reached through dialectical rational argument but they can also be reached through instincts, emotional or other direct experiences. Other forms of conviction than those based on certainty and knowledge are possible. Direct and participatory experience as well as intuition can be decisive. Convictions can concern matters which are hard to describe in words or pictures, for example experiences of a mystical kind. In fact, introducing conviction, direct experience and emotions as alternatives to rational dialectical argument for guiding action means that skepticism can be compatible not only with practical action but also with mysticism and spiritual experiences that lead to trust and conviction but perhaps not to certainty and knowledge.

In everyday life, we act on the basis of justified beliefs, trust, convictions, habits, basic intuitions and instincts (sometimes provided by evolution) more often than on the basis of certainty



and knowledge. Skeptical doubt and uncertainty mainly arise when we reflect on various claims of knowledge and truth that we are presented with.

## Concluding remarks

The human condition is such that we can never be fully certain of our descriptions and explanations. Mostly, the best we can hope for is justified belief. In the face of a continuously changing world, knowledge and certainty should not be seen as qualities we already possess, but rather as ideal goals towards which we are continuously striving. In line with skepticism, we should maintain an open, inquisitive and skeptical stance both toward commonly espoused beliefs and commonly rejected beliefs. In everyday life, we can act on the basis of trust in our justified beliefs and convictions. This is sufficient to act bravely but cautiously, hoping for the best, being ready to show flexibility by revising our beliefs and plans whenever we get good reasons to do so.

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