

PHILOSOPHY FROM A SKEPTICAL PERSPECTIVE

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CAMBRIDGE

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One of the questions that philosophers discuss is, How can we avoid – or, at least, reduce – errors when explaining the world? The skeptical answer to this question is that we cannot avoid errors because no statement is certain or even definitely plausible, but we can eliminate some past errors. Philosophers invest much effort in attempts to refute skepticism because it strikes them as contrary to common sense, but they have met with no shred of success. The reason is simple: common sense actually sides with skepticism rather than against it. But, philosophers see things differently because they derive from skepticism unreasonable corollaries. These corollaries are indeed unreasonable, yet their derivations are all invalid. To illustrate the reasonableness of our version of skepticism, we draw attention repeatedly to diverse practical consequences of our discussions. These consequences bring philosophy down to Earth and comprise an outline of a skeptical guide to the real world, no less; however, like all guides, it is imperfect. This book advocates the skeptical position and discusses its practical applications in science, ethics, aesthetics, and politics.

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Preface

For more than two centuries, the mainstream rationalist tradition in philosophy took it for granted that its chief role was to respond to the skeptic challenge. It is not quite clear why, for the challenge rests on the assumption that there is nothing to skepticism, that it is not serious, that it is obviously answerable. If so, why bother with it? Moreover, if it is so obviously faulty, why is it so hard to answer? Why do so many philosophers see it as so terrible and threatening to our sanity?

Skepticism is dangerous, most philosophers explain, because it is paralyzing. It is easy to show that this observation is obviously false; skeptics suffer from paralysis no more than other people. Remarkably, critics of skepticism use this observation as an even stronger argument against skepticism. People who claim that they are skeptics are not paralyzed; hence, it follows logically that they only pretend to be skeptics. Yet their preaching, the critics of skepticism continue, however flip-pant it is, can nonetheless cause harm by spreading discouragement. It is obvious they conclude their argument, that doubt discourages.

All this is very convincing; we do not know why. For, obviously, it is far from the truth: skeptics are not paralyzed because skepticism does not always paralyze. In truth, every philosophy moves some people to action and others to inaction. Indeed, in a crisis, under conditions of utter ignorance, often some spirited people take the lead, do something, and become leaders just because of the sane conviction that any action is better than inaction. Skeptics take this to be common, whereas their critics assume that conduct follows according to assured tradition or scientific ideas, to those that underwent the process of strict verification. But, actually, there is no such assurance. In addition, motivation – however following whatever chain of causality – is still

quite distinct from logical conclusions following invariably from any premise. Why then do we prefer some conduct to others? Can a skeptic explain this as reasonable? The answer is: only up to a point.

With patience and diligence, let us strive to pinpoint the difficulties that mainstream and skeptic philosophers meet facing each other. On the whole, we are willing to enter any subfield of philosophy where the dispute rages. But, we limit our discussion to the reasonable or rationalist arguments. We have little interest in discussing the arguments that seem to us not worthy of critical response.

Here, we survey the reasonable literature devoted to skepticism, where we take even the slightest degree of reasonableness as sufficient for comment, brief or detailed, as the situation warrants. We do so with a slant toward the practical applications because their reasonableness is easier to spot and easier to agree with and because it is a common error that skepticism is impractical. Also, we contribute to the correction of two great, widespread, expensive mistaken views: that philosophy is barren and that all disputes (especially philosophical) are practically harmful. Engaging in philosophical disputes about any activity can improve that activity, we claim, even if the dispute about it will never be settled. For any dispute may eliminate some perceived errors and thereby help remove waste of efforts in wrong directions. And, arguing that people waste their lives on worthless activities may help prevent wasting lives on worthless ends even though we will never know for sure what ends are worthy.

In our presentation, we follow the traditional rules of discourse, the ones that Bernard Russell and Karl Popper have stressed and followed:

1. In philosophical (as any other) activity, one should say why it matters. This runs contrary to Ludwig Wittgenstein's assertion that philosophy is inherently "idle"; that the sole task of honest philosophy is to resolve confusion.
2. Philosophical (as any other) texts can and should be as clear and understandable as possible, hopefully well enough to be open to criticism. This runs contrary to the opaque style of many philosophers, particularly the existentialists among them and particularly if it is a means for escaping possible criticism.

In line with these precepts, this book addresses all curious readers; basic training in philosophy suffices.

We advocate skepticism quite openly. We consider no statement certain, demonstrable, plausible, or otherwise justified in the epistemological sense of these terms. We present repeatedly alternative versions of reasonability that, we contend, are both skeptical and commonsensical. We apply this thesis to epistemology, ethics, politics, and aesthetics.

We reject offhand the relativist position that all theories are equally serious (or equally unserious) so that anything goes, for we deny that skepticism implies relativism in any way. Clearly, by its own light, relativism is not serious. Nevertheless, some philosophers take it seriously and with great regret – only because they erroneously consider relativism a corollary to skepticism. Others try hard to refute skepticism and they are very sad to admit that they have failed; however, they remain convinced that skepticism is false simply because relativism is. Yet the truth remains: skepticism is true and relativism is false.

There are three ideas that people often consider together: skepticism, the idea that no position is demonstrable; relativism, the idea that there is no absolute truth; and nihilism, the idea that all ideas are of equal value. Admittedly, relativism implies nihilism. Nevertheless, we know of thinkers who advocated any one of these three ideas and any two of them. What is important for us here is that skepticism need not be nihilist. This is so just because not all versions of skepticism are relativist. Similarly, not all versions of relativism are skeptical; Wittgenstein, it seems, was a relativist but not a skeptic.¹ Most of his works are devoted to combat skepticism and, perhaps to that end, he – at times, at least – felt the need to endorse relativism. Whether this is so is under dispute among Wittgenstein's disciples, and it is not for us to adjudicate. Rather, our starting point is the advocacy of skepticism and the rejection of relativism and more so of nihilism.

Indeed, we consider relativism and nihilism versions of irrationalism: their advocates oppose rationality or, at least, they judge rationality to be insignificant. But perhaps this is not so; perhaps relativists are not skeptics and they use skepticism only to prove their point, for skepticism is used quite often as a weapon in the hands of people

¹ Wittgenstein, in his *Philosophical Investigations* (§109), said, "And we are not permitted to present any kind of theory. Nothing hypothetical is allowed in our considerations." (Authors' translation; but perhaps we misread this: he was a notoriously obscure writer.)

who do not advocate it in the least. This is true of irrationalists in general and of some relativists in particular: they employ skeptical arguments although they do not consider skepticism to be true. Most of them are committed to one dogma or another and are even proud of it, considering open-mindedness frivolous and any expression of skepticism sheer levity, the lack of commitment based on flippancy. Therefore, they limit their use of skepticism to their struggle against reason: if rationalism were true, then its adherents could refute skepticism; but, indeed, they cannot. Nevertheless, everybody can try to be open-minded and invite criticism, and this we heartily recommend.

We try to come as close as possible to relativism without the loss of rationality and without falling into nihilism: we should not forget how very important and responsible it is to use our brains, poor as they admittedly are. We claim that the best way to achieve this is by adopting pluralism but never categorically. Pluralism may raise the ability to behave in a responsible, open-minded way, but only if it does not sanction any silly view, if it is not nihilist. The nihilist sort of open-mindedness that does not oppose any idea, no matter how silly, is flippant indeed. We should not adopt pluralism out of indifference: relativists tend to do so in the hope of avoiding all disagreements; with the intent of avoiding disputes, they make light of all differences between competing ideas. We take pluralism as resting on ignorance: ideas are important, and we disagree because we do not know which of the alternative options is true and because we know that quite possibly we are all in error. The truth is still eluding us, but we do not lose heart. The attitude that we advocate limits pluralism to the exclusion of ideas that are known as effectively criticized, as long as the criticism of them is left unanswered. On this, we have an important disagreement with the relativists. They may feel obliged to admit that despite their relativism, they disallow some utterly unacceptable ideas. Yet, they admit this only under duress and they do not see this as the refutation of their relativism. This leads us to also oppose relativism as one of the objectionable ideas that our moderate pluralism does disallow. Nihilism is another such idea, which is possibly a part of relativism. Thus, we consider our moderate pluralism a sign of poverty: our ignorance is unavoidable but it is still undesirable and we should always fight it as best we can. Therefore, we consider it progress whenever an idea that our moderate pluralism has admitted becomes no longer

admissible as a result of some valid criticism; we likewise consider it progress whenever a new idea is conceived and found admissible to moderate pluralism. It is useful to apply this policy to relativism and to as many other ideas as possible while remaining rationalists – namely, while excluding the views that seem to us effectively criticized. Therefore, whenever it is possible and not too cumbersome, we try to rectify a refuted idea so that in its modified version it can remain an open option.

This policy we apply not only to relativism but also to all other ideas that we criticize throughout this book. Consider psychological reductionism, the idea that all thinking can be fully reduced to psychological concepts. We come as close as possible without losing rationality; we do acknowledge that psychology is largely responsible for our sense of what is true, good, and beautiful; but we reject the idea that the meanings of these concepts can be reduced to pure psychology.

Thus, our view is closest to what David Hume wanted his philosophy to be; moderate skepticism, he called it. We achieve his aim with ease because we employ tools that were not available to him. He was unable to free himself from the traditional, classical idea that rationality equals proof. As long as we do not explicitly reject the classical identification of rationality with proof (or with proof-surrogates), the slightest concession to skepticism makes us (unwittingly, perhaps, or even against our expressed wish) vulnerable to the charge of relativism and its allure. Yet, insistence on the idea that proof is possible is dogmatic, especially in the face of Hume's criticism. This intolerable dilemma has hounded philosophy between Hume and Popper. Even Russell admitted in the eve of his life that he was caught in this dilemma, having (rightly) found relativism too tolerant and classical rationalism too rigid. All his life he searched for a middle ground and he finally admitted that he could not find it. It is thus no surprise that Popper's philosophy stands out so. Even Russell could not stomach it because he found it too pessimistic. In this, he was in error: we must judge it pessimistic if we cling to the view that only the demonstrable is valuable. But, if we consider the vast progress that science has achieved without proof, then we may very well opt for optimism.

If one tries to find another philosophy that resembles Popper's to some degree, one has to go as far as the theology of the great medieval thinker, Moses Maimonides, who said it is impossible for mere humans

to know what the Lord is, only what He is not, but it behooves us to try repeatedly. Taking seriously the modern move from theology to natural science, his so-called negative theology translates into negative natural philosophy. This takes us even further back, to the Socratic idea that even though we cannot find out what is true, we are able to find out what is false and try to avoid it. This way of thinking annoys some, perhaps because of the fear of becoming irrationalist. It seems to others just right, particularly for science: laws of nature preclude some states of affairs (for example, bodies lighter than water cannot sink by themselves, or, energy of a closed system cannot increase). The state of affairs that does exist is a window of opportunity that at times we make use of but not necessarily with any understanding. Indeed, action usually precedes thinking, at least such actions that are as essential to life as the intake of air and nourishment. Scientific research is the effort to explain these opportunities, and the explanations often point to new opportunities for us to try. But, the whole venture is as much due to our good fortune (usually called the grace of God) as it is to our very presence on this Earth. Some like this because it sounds religious; others hate it for the very same reason. We ourselves are indifferent to such similarities – until and unless we find ourselves too naïve or credulous.

Scientific explanation links events – happy or unhappy as they may be; hence, windows of opportunity – to their ostensible causes. We can imagine which opportunity has led to the cause by assuming another causal explanation. Suppose that we could, in this way, regress in time as far as possible; we still assume some cause that together with the laws of nature links certain current events to other antecedent events. But can we ever similarly hope to explain any and all events? Alas, no, our current theory of explanation does not allow this. To echo Albert Einstein, our model of causal explanation leaves unanswerable the question: Why is there anything in this world of ours?

Again, some like this idea very much because they find in it license for their religious preferences; others hate it for the very same reason. We find both these responses excessive. As Immanuel Kant said, our ignorance is no ground for any specific speculation; at the very best, it is compatible with too many.

Finally, we offer a word about the systematic engagement throughout this book with the psychological aspects of philosophical problems.

Traditional philosophy developed the theories of scientific method and scientific knowledge as a psychology of learning and of knowledge. This begs the question, of course, because psychology should be a science proper, not the foundation of science. The great advance in twentieth-century philosophy was the move from psychology to sociology; from the traditional questions of how do I learn and how do I know to the questions of how do we learn and how do we know. This change opened new vistas touched on often throughout this work. Indeed, the new circumstance begs question no less than the old because we want our sociology to be scientific as well. Hence, such progress makes sense only if philosophy becomes fallibilist; that is, if it admits that we can claim that no theory is error-free. Also, the major defect of the traditional theory – namely, that its psychology is not sophisticated – does have a parallel in the new theory: fortunately, the necessary part of the sociology of the new philosophy is trite and asserts hardly more than that the funds of knowledge are not individual but rather social (institutional). In any case, the change invites a replacement from the old to the new style of both the psychological and sociological aspects of learning. This change in sociology is easy and it has led to the growth of a new scientific field: the sociology of science. This change in psychology is still waiting its turn, although it is clearly both significant and challenging. In this book, we undertake a beginning in this direction, and we differ from tradition at least in our stress on the limitations within which we conceive this project. We suggest that it is at least useful for philosophers who find the transition from the traditional to the new to be a difficult one. And, because they are still in the majority, we hope that this book speaks to them as well.

The first draft of this book was written by Abraham Meidan, and was partly based on his previous book, *Skepticism is True*. Joseph Agassi then broadened and elaborated on it, with the manuscript going back and forth in the usual manner of co-authorship.

Tel Aviv, Fall 2007

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Introduction

Philosophy consists of attitudes toward life or ways of life and inquiries in such regard, and they come in a great variety, of course. Philosophical tradition displays a regular bias in favor of the life of contemplation and equanimity. There was an effort to displace these values with a new tradition – nineteenth-century Romanticism – that emulated the heroes and despots of old and likewise glorified the life of achievements, especially great ones, military and political. The rise of brutal regimes that pride themselves on such achievements has somewhat attenuated the popularity of this enduring and sadistic tradition but, alas, not to the point of extinction.

Philosophical inquiries traditionally center on a small set of questions that presumably signify the choice of an attitude toward life or a way of life. Socrates, the father of Western philosophy, asserted his philosophy of life in his famous slogan: “the unexamined life is not worth living.” His way of life was devoted to preaching this idea by challenging people to examine their own life: he moved throughout the day from one place where people gathered to another, challenging the opinions of anyone who would accept his challenge.

Here are examples of questions that raise discussions that tradition considers philosophical. What are things made of? What kinds of things are there in the world? Is the soul immortal? How can we avoid errors when we seek explanations (of physical or mental events)? What are the right principles of the right moral conduct? What is the best political regime? Such questions sally forth in quest for the very best, even though we know that the very best is unattainable because we are not divine. But the quest for the idea of the best is the quest for criteria; to find what we would deem the best is to find a