

What is Skepticism?

An overview of skepticism

By John Jackson © 2007

Skepticism is an honest search for knowledge. It is an approach to claims akin to the [scientific method](#). It is a powerful and positive methodology (a collection of methods of inquiry) that is used to evaluate claims and make decisions. It is used to search for the (provisional) truth in matters and to make decisions that are based on sound reasoning, logic, and evidence. Skepticism is based on a simple method: *doubt and inquiry*. The idea is to neither initially accept claims nor dismiss them; it's about questioning them and testing them for validity. Only after inquiry does a skeptic take a stance on an issue.

There is more than one way to look at claims of all kinds:

Acceptance

For many reasons, people will accept claims at face value. The claims may agree with their other beliefs and so are deemed acceptable, they may have heard a claim repeated so often that they assume it must be true (e.g. we only use 10% of our brains) or it may be something they would like to be true; that fits in with their world-view or that of their social group.

This approach has the major disadvantage that claims and beliefs are not scrutinised and could well be false.

Denial

This approach is where a claim is dismissed *without proper consideration* because it does not fit in with a person's current understanding, belief system or world-view. No thought or scrutiny needs to be used; if the claim is not deemed acceptable for any reason, it is denied. The disadvantage to this approach is that if a claim were to be true, it would not be recognised as such.

Doubt and inquiry

This method is the essence of skepticism. Claims, whether they look reasonable or extremely unlikely to be true, will be doubted; however, they will not be denied. A skeptic will then inquire to reach a justified conclusion (where possible). The method involves:

1. **Doubt.**

Doubt is not the same as denial. Skeptics use doubt constructively; it is a provisional stance, the *suspension of judgement*: a position held until a claim can be assessed. The purpose of constructive doubt is to avoid hasty conclusions such as accepting or rejecting claims without justification.

2. **Inquiry.**

To inquire means to *search for knowledge*. This is the very heart of skepticism. If a claim is to be examined, evidence in support of the claim needs to be considered, but crucially, so do counter-claims and alternative explanations. Successful inquiry is the result of examining all of the evidence related to a claim and reaching a conclusion that is justifiable.

After inquiry, a skeptic will form a conclusion on an issue (should sufficient robust evidence have been available to justify one); however, this conclusion is a provisional one that may change if better or newer information comes to light. This aspect of holding a provisional position on matters gives skepticism the beneficial attribute of being self-correcting. There is no dogma with skepticism: no matter how sound a conclusion appears there is always room for it to be shown to be wrong by new evidence.

The advantage of this method is that claims are scrutinised. False and misleading claims stand a much better chance of being discovered as such; and any claim, whether ordinary, paranormal, or scientific, that seems unlikely but is nonetheless true, will have a good chance of being shown to be true.

The burden of proof

The burden of proof is the concept that it is up to those making a claim to prove it, or provide good supporting evidence for it, rather than for others to disprove it. This is the same concept as how a court of law operates. It is up to the prosecution to prove that the accused is guilty; it's not up to the defence to prove innocence.

This is the approach to claims that skeptics take. A claim presented will be doubted (presumed unproved) until the evidence in support of it can be examined. If the evidence supports the claim, either completely or beyond reasonable doubt, the claim will be accepted; otherwise it will be rejected unless or until further evidence is presented.

What is evidence?

When talking about evidence, skeptics are referring to tangible or empirical evidence. That is, evidence that can be inspected or examined by third parties. It is the quality, or robustness, of supporting evidence that determines whether a claim is accepted or rejected.

It is because of the importance of the high quality of evidence required to support claims that one of the most popular forms of general evidence, personal testimony (or anecdote), is not accepted as being satisfactory to support a claim. Psychologists have identified many cognitive errors (of reasoning, perception, memory, etc.) that we all possess which means that we can form many incorrect conclusions about things no matter how sincerely we may believe them.

Common misconceptions:

- **Skepticism is a belief system.**

It's not; it's a *methodology*. In fact it is quite the opposite of a belief system. Of course skeptics, people who use the skeptical method, often have opinions that are at odds with many people's beliefs; however, that does not make skepticism merely an alternative belief system.

- **Skepticism is the position of non-belief.**

It is very common for people to refer to themselves or others as 'skeptics' when they don't accept or believe something: 'global-warming skeptics', for example. This is not the correct usage of the word regarding scientific skepticism however. As explained above, skepticism is a methodology and as such, claims that are supported will be accepted by skeptics.

- **Skeptics are closed-minded.**

This criticism is normally made by those who believe in things that have been disproved or are unproven. Concluding that a claim is false when it fails to stand up to scrutiny is not being closed-minded - quite the opposite, in fact; and assuming or holding the provisional position that a claim is false until proven otherwise is also the correct approach to take (see *Burden of Proof* above). Forming conclusions based upon the best available evidence does not make one closed-minded simply because this logically-sound position disagrees with someone's belief or desire that their belief were real.

- **Skeptics do not believe in anything.**

This misconception probably comes from philosophical skepticism; a branch of philosophy that questions whether absolute knowledge and certainty are possible. Modern skepticism is *rational or scientific skepticism*; the method of doubt and inquiry explained above.

Many people also make a fallacy of equivocation and confuse the word *sceptical* (to be doubtful) with *skepticism* (the methodology) and assume that skeptics are simply doubters or disbelievers.

- **Skepticism is about opposing claims.**

Skepticism is about *examining* claims, not opposing them. As explained, skeptics will doubt claims until they can be scrutinised; this, however, is the correct way to deal with new claims. There's no logical reason to accept or reject a claim before it has been examined - hence the suspension of judgement.

Of course skeptics do oppose many claims, such as many involving the paranormal and pseudoscience; this is not simply an automatic opposition to such claims however, it's because such claims have been examined and the supporting evidence does not stand up to scrutiny.

- **Skeptics are debunkers.**

Bunk is another word for nonsense and means the opposite of something that is true or factual. To debunk something means to remove the nonsense from it and reveal what is true. Skepticism is not about debunking per se, but debunking *is* a consequence of critical inquiry. In fact, contrary to popular understanding, the best way of showing that something is true is that it can *resist attempts to prove it false*: attempting to prove something false is a robust way of testing its validity.

The misconception here is not that skeptics sometimes end up debunking claims; but that the word 'debunker' is often used as a pejorative term. Debunking nonsense ideas, scams, hoaxes and misleading claims is of positive, not negative, value.

It should be made clear, however, that skeptics do not set out with the purpose of debunking claims (i.e. holding a preconceived and unjustified position of a claim's falsity). Some claims will simply end up being debunked as a *consequence* of skeptical inquiry. That's an important distinction to understand.

Summary

Skepticism is a methodology, not a position on matters. It is a way of examining claims and making decisions. The idea is to apply the rules of logic and reason with critical thinking skills in assessing claims or issues and to form conclusions based on *evidence*, not on personal preference or prejudice.

These methods make it more likely that those who use skepticism will reach correct conclusions on issues; which, of course, can be of great benefit in all walks of life: personal, business, health matters, recognising scams and misleading claims, finance, etc.

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