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Article

Discussion

Skepticism

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This article is about

the philosophical term.

For the metal band, see

[Skepticism \(band\)](#)

the magazines, see

[Skeptic \(magazine\)](#)

. *For*

Contemporary **skepticism** (or **scepticism**) is loosely used to denote any questioning attitude,^[1] or some degree of doubt regarding claims that are elsewhere taken for granted.^[2]

The word *skepticism* can characterise a position on a single claim, but in scholastic circles more frequently describes a lasting mind-set. Skepticism is an approach to accepting, rejecting, or suspending judgment on new information that requires the new information to be well supported by evidence.^[3] Individuals who proclaim to have a skeptical outlook are frequently called skeptics, often without regard to whether it is philosophical skepticism or empirical skepticism that they profess.^[4]

In [religion](#), skepticism refers to 'doubt concerning basic religious principles (such as immortality, providence, and revelation).' (Merriam–

Certainty series

[Agnosticism](#)

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Skepticism

[Solipsism](#)

Webster). Often skepticism is confused with agnosticism for the reason that the skeptic usually is also an agnostic.

Uncertainty

v • d • 

In [classical philosophy](#), **skepticism** (or **scepticism**) is the teachings and the traits of the 'Skeptikoi', a school of philosophers of whom it was said that they 'asserted nothing but only opined.' (Liddell and Scott) In this sense, **philosophical skepticism**, or **Pyrrhonism**, is the philosophical position that one should suspend judgment in investigations.^[5]

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Definition [edit]

In ordinary usage, **skepticism** (US) or **scepticism** (UK) (Greek: 'σκέπτομαι' *skeptomai*, to look about, to consider; see also [spelling differences](#)) refers to:

- (a) an attitude of doubt or a disposition to incredulity either in general or toward a particular object;
- (b) the [doctrine](#) that true [knowledge](#) or certainty in a particular area is impossible; or
- (c) the method of suspended judgment, systematic doubt, or criticism that is characteristic of skeptics (Merriam–Webster).

In [philosophy](#), skepticism refers more specifically to any one of several propositions. These include propositions about:

- (a) an inquiry,
- (b) a method of obtaining knowledge through systematic doubt and continual testing,
- (c) the arbitrariness, relativity, or subjectivity of moral values,
- (d) the limitations of knowledge,
- (e) a method of intellectual caution and suspended judgment.

Scientific skepticism

[[edit](#)]

Main article:

Scientific

skepticism

A scientific (or **empirical**) skeptic is one who questions the reliability of certain kinds of claims by subjecting them to a systematic investigation.^[6] The **scientific method** details the specific process by which this investigation of **reality** is conducted. Considering the rigor of the scientific method, science itself may simply be thought of as an organized form of skepticism. This does not mean that the scientific skeptic is necessarily a scientist who conducts live experiments (though this may be the case), but that the skeptic generally accepts claims that are in his/her view likely to be true based on testable **hypotheses** and **critical thinking**.

Common topics that scientifically skeptical literature questions include health claims surrounding certain foods, procedures, and alternative medicines, such as **homeopathy**, **Reiki**, **Thought Field Therapy** (TFT), **vertebral subluxations**; the plausibility and existence of **supernatural** entities (such as **ghosts**, **poltergeists**, **angels**, and **gods** as well as the existence of **ESP/telekinesis**, **psychic** powers, and **telepathy**, and thus the credibility of **parapsychology**); topics in **cryptozoology**, **Bigfoot**, the **Loch Ness monster**, **alien visitations**, **UFOs**, **crop circles**, **astrology**, **repressed memories**, **near death experiences** (NDE), **creationism/intelligent design**, **dowsing**, **conspiracy theories**, and other claims the skeptic sees as unlikely to be true on scientific grounds.^[7]

Empirical or scientific skeptics do not profess philosophical skepticism. Whereas a philosophical skeptic may deny the very existence of knowledge, an empirical skeptic merely seeks likely proof before accepting that knowledge.

False claims of skepticism

[[edit](#)]

Richard Wilson, in an article in *New Statesman*

, wrote that some

advocates of discredited intellectual positions such as [AIDS denial](#) and [Holocaust denial](#) engage in [pseudoskeptical](#) behavior when they characterize themselves as "skeptics" despite [cherry picking](#) evidence that conforms to a pre-existing belief.^[8] According to Richard Wilson, who highlights the phenomenon in his book *Don't Get Fooled*

Again (2008) , the characteristic feature of false skepticism is that it "centres not on an impartial search for the truth, but on the defence of a preconceived ideological position".

Scientific skepticism is itself sometimes criticized on this ground. The term [pseudoskepticism](#) has found occasional use in controversial fields where opposition from scientific skeptics is strong. For example, in 1994, Susan Blackmore, a parapsychologist who became more skeptical and eventually became a [CSICOP](#) fellow in 1991, described what she termed the "worst kind of pseudoskepticism":

"There are some members of the skeptics' groups who clearly believe they know the right answer prior to inquiry. They appear not to be interested in weighing alternatives, investigating strange claims, or trying out psychic experiences or altered states for themselves (heaven forbid!), but only in promoting their own particular belief structure and cohesion..."^[9]

Religious skepticism

[\[edit\]](#)

Main article:

[Religious skepticism](#)

skepticism

Religious skepticism is skepticism regarding faith-based claims. Religious skeptics may focus on the core tenets of [religions](#), such as the existence of divine beings or reports of earthly [miracles](#). A religious skeptic is not necessarily an [atheist](#) or [agnostic](#).

Philosophical skepticism

[\[edit\]](#)

Main article:

[Philosophical skepticism](#)

In philosophical skepticism, **pyrrhonism** is a position that refrains from making truth claims. A

philosophical skeptic does not claim that truth is impossible (which would be a truth claim). The label is commonly used to describe other philosophies which appear similar to philosophical skepticism, such as [academic skepticism](#), an ancient variant of Platonism that claimed knowledge of truth was impossible. [Empiricism](#) is a closely related, but not identical, position to philosophical skepticism. Empiricists see empiricism as a pragmatic compromise between philosophical skepticism and [nomothetic](#) science; philosophical skepticism is in turn sometimes referred to as "radical empiricism."

Philosophical skepticism originated in ancient [Greek philosophy](#).^[10] The Greek [Sophists](#) of the 5th century BC were for the most part skeptics. [Pyrrhonism](#) was a school of skepticism founded by [Aenesidemus](#) in the first century BC and recorded by [Sextus Empiricus](#) in the late 2nd century or early 3rd century AD. One of its first proponents was [Pyrrho of Elis](#) (c. 360-275 B.C.), who traveled and studied as far as [India](#) and propounded the adoption of "practical" skepticism. Subsequently, in the "New Academy" [Arcesilaus](#) (c. 315-241 B.C.) and [Carneades](#) (c. 213-129 B.C.) developed more theoretical perspectives, by which conceptions of absolute truth and falsity were refuted as uncertain. Carneades criticized the views of the Dogmatists, especially supporters of [Stoicism](#), asserting that absolute certainty of knowledge is impossible. [Sextus Empiricus](#) (c. A.D. 200), the main authority for Greek skepticism, developed the position further, incorporating aspects of [empiricism](#) into the basis for asserting knowledge.

Greek skeptics criticized the [Stoics](#), accusing them of [dogmatism](#). For the skeptics, the [logical](#) mode of argument was untenable, as it relied on propositions which could not be said to be either true or false without relying on further propositions. This was the [regress argument](#), whereby every proposition must rely on other propositions in order to maintain its validity (see the five [tropes](#) of [Agrippa the Sceptic](#)). In addition, the skeptics argued that two propositions could not rely on each other, as this would create a [circular argument](#) (as p implies q and q implies p). For the skeptics, such logic was thus an inadequate measure of truth and could create as many problems as it claimed to have solved. Truth was not, however, necessarily unobtainable, but rather an idea which did not yet exist in a pure form. Although skepticism was accused of denying the possibility of truth, in fact it appears to have mainly been a critical school which merely claimed that logicians had not discovered truth.

In [Islamic philosophy](#), skepticism was established by [Al-Ghazali](#) (1058–1111), known in the West as "Algazel", as part of the orthodox [Ash'ari](#) school of [Islamic theology](#), whose method of skepticism shares many similarities with Descartes' method.^[11]

René Descartes is credited for developing a global skepticism as a **thought experiment** in his attempt to find absolute certainty on which to base the foundation of his philosophy. **David Hume** has also been described as a global skeptic. However, Descartes was not ostensibly a skeptic and developed his theory of an absolute certainty to disprove other skeptics who argued that there is no certainty.

See also

[edit]

- [Critical thinking](#)
- [Debunker](#), a person who discredits and exposes claims as being false, exaggerated or pretentious.
- [Doubt](#)



[Thinking portal](#)



[Atheism portal](#)

Literary skeptics

[edit]

- [Ambrose Bierce: *The Devil's Dictionary*](#)
- [Ignacy Krasicki: *Fables and Parables*](#)
- [Herman Melville: *Moby-Dick*](#) , other works
- [Montaigne: *Essais*](#).
- [Bolesław Prus: *Pharaoh*](#)
- [Voltaire: *Candide*](#)

Organizations

[edit]

- [Australian Skeptics](#)
- [Center for Inquiry](#)
- [Committee for Skeptical Inquiry](#)
- [New England Skeptical Society](#)
- [New Zealand Skeptics](#)
- [James Randi Educational Foundation](#)
- [Rationalist International](#)
- [Skeptical Society of Saint Louis](#)

- [The Skeptics Society](#)

- [UK-Skeptics](#)^[12]

Media

[edit]

- [MythBusters](#)
- [Penn & Teller: Bullshit!](#)
- [Point of Inquiry](#)
- [Skeptic's Dictionary](#)
- [Skepticality](#)
- [Skeptoid](#)
- [The Skeptics' Guide to the Universe](#)

Notes

[edit]

- ↑ See R. H. Popkin, *The History of Skepticism from Erasmus to Descartes* (rev. ed. 1968); C. L. Stough, *Greek Skepticism* (1969); M. Burnyeat, ed., *The Skeptical Tradition* (1983); B. Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism* (1984). [Encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com](#)^[13]
- ↑ "Philosophical views are typically classed as skeptical when they involve advancing some degree of doubt regarding claims that are elsewhere taken for granted." [URM.edu](#)^[14]
- ↑ "Philosophical skepticism should be distinguished from ordinary skepticism, where doubts are raised against certain beliefs or types of beliefs because the evidence for the particular belief or type of belief is weak or lacking..." [Skeptic.com](#)^[15]
- ↑ "...the two most influential forms of skepticism have, arguably, been the radical epistemological skepticism of the classical Pyrrhonian skeptics and the Cartesian form of radical epistemological skepticism that Descartes considers in..." [UTM.edu](#)^[16]
- ↑ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines Of Pyrrhonism*, Translated by R. G. Bury, [Harvard University Press](#), Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1933, p. 21
- ↑ [Skeptoid.com](#)^[17]: *What is skepticism?*
- ↑ Martin Gardner, *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science* [Dover](#), 1957; ISBN 0-486-20394-8
- ↑ Richard Wilson, *Against the Evidence*, [Newt](#), [Statesman](#), 18 September 2006^[18]
- ↑ JE Kennedy, "The Capricious, Actively Evasive, Unsustainable Nature of Psi: A Summary and

Hypotheses", *The Journal of Parapsychology*, Volume 67, pp. 53–74, 2003. See Note 1 page 64 quoting Blackmore, S. J. (1994). *Women skeptics*. In L. Coly & R. White (Eds.), *Women and parapsychology* (pp. 234–236). New York: Parapsychology Foundation.

10. [^] [Scepticism - History of Scepticism](#)
11. [^] Najm, Sami M. (July-October 1966), "The Place and Function of Doubt in the Philosophies of Descartes and Al-Ghazali", *Philosophy East and West* (Philosophy East and West, Vol. 16, No. 3/4) **16** (3-4): 133–41, doi:10.2307/1397534, <http://jstor.org/stable/1397534>
12. [^] [Skeptics.org](#)

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Further reading

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- Richard Wilson, *Don't Get Fooled Again - The skeptic's guide to life*, Icon Books, London, 2008. ISBN 978-184831014-8

External links

[edit]

- Skeptical Inquiry at the Open Directory Project
- George Hansen, "CSICOP and the Skeptic" *The Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* vol. 86, no. 1, January 1992, pp. 19–63. A critical history of CSICOP and U..S. skeptical organizations. tricksterbook.com
- Kleiner, Kurt (2005), "Most Scientific Papers are Probably Wrong", *NewScientist*, 30 August 2005 [Enr.com](http://enr.com), newscientist.com
- "In the Name of Skepticism: Martin Gardner's Misrepresentations" *General Semantics*, by Bruce I. Kodish, appeared in *General Semantics Bulletin*, Number 71, 2004. The *Bulletin* is published by the [Institute of General Semantics](http://learn-gs.org), learn-gs.org
- J. C. Lester, "A skeptical Look at 'A Skeptical Look at Karl Popper'", la-articles.org.uk
- Peter Suber, *Classical Skepticism* An exposition of Pyrrho's skepticism through the writings of Sextus Empiricus, earlham.edu
- Outstanding skeptics of the 20th century - *Skeptical*

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Inquirer

Magazine, csicop.org

- [Nonsense \(And Why It's So Popular\)](#) ^{help} A course syllabus from The College of Wooster. wooster.edu
- "Skepticism" ^{help}. *Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Robert Appleton Company. 1913. [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Catholic_Encyclopedia_\(1913\)/Skepticism](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Catholic_Encyclopedia_(1913)/Skepticism) ^{help} - A Christian (Catholic) account of scepticism

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