SKEPTICISM AND THE DEMOCRATIC IDEAL

Robert B. Talisse

Robert Talisse argues that skepticism is required for a healthy democracy, and provides some illuminating and amusing examples of popular dismissive attitudes towards skepticism.

I recently attended the wedding of a relative. At the reception, I was seated at a table of mostly strangers and a few distant cousins. We all made the most of our situation, and attempted to carry on the usual polite conversation; we agreed that the bride's gown was lovely, and that the ceremony was beautiful. Eventually the question of my profession was raised. My habit is in such situations to claim to be a logician. I do this as a way of avoiding small-talk: I have found that those who are legitimately interested in the answer to the question they have asked will probe deeper, and those who are simply being polite will respond with 'interesting' and then move on. In this particular instance, my strategy did not work as I planned.

In response to my claim to be a logician, one gentleman replied, 'A logician? Do you mean you're a philosopher?' I replied that he was correct, I was a professional philosopher. Perplexed, his wife then inquired, 'What does one do as a *professional* philosopher?' and, before I could response, the gentleman said, 'He earns a living destroying other people's beliefs.' Defending myself, I responded, 'Well, yes, a large part of what I do is to challenge people's beliefs, but that is not all philosophers do – we also propose positive views and try to devise arguments in favor of them.' The gentleman's response was interesting, he said, 'Philosophers have positive views? I don't think so. Name one view philosophers agree on.' 'Agreement,' I said, 'is not the point. Philosophers of course disagree with each other, but each of us has positive view that we try to defend against our opponents.' 'Ah ha!' he said, 'So you don't only try to destroy the beliefs of your students, but you try to destroy the beliefs of fellow philosophers as well!' He continued, 'So things stand as I said: you're in the business of

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nay-saying, or *skepticism*.' 'Well, in a sense, yes,' I said, 'if by "skeptic" you mean what the Greeks meant, namely, "inquirer", then, yes, philosophers are in the business of skepticism; and I'd say that skepticism in this sense is a good thing!' Now getting annoyed, he responded, 'A *good thing*? Why? You admit yourself that you have nothing solid by way of alternatives to offer those whose beliefs you disturb! Why don't you just mind your own business – leave people alone and let them believe as they wish?'

I take my interlocutor to have posed an important challenge to those who take an interest in engaging the public philosophically, and who believe, with Socrates, that public philosophical examination is an important political activity. I want in this brief essay to clarify what I take to be the principal intellectual and political motivations for the kind of philosophical activity that my interlocutor characterized as 'skepticism.' I shall throughout think of the skeptical attitude as allied with what I shall call 'humanism.' Skepticism in this sense is to be distinguished from various technical forms of skepticism advanced in epistemology by professional philosophers; moreover, it is allied with humanism because it manifests a trust in the powers of human reason and inquiry for addressing the problems that most deeply concern us. I undertake this task because my sense is that these crucial elements of humanism are often overlooked or misrepresented in popular media coverage of skepticism. I hence fear that the position of the skeptic is being misunderstood by the public at large. If this is correct, then efforts to bring a skeptical perspective into the cultural mainstream will prove counter-productive. The essay, then, does not seek to break new ground in the analysis of the nature of skepticism; accordingly, much of what I have to say about the skeptical approach will be familiar. The essay rather aims to raise some concerns about how skepticism is often presented and to suggest a strategy for addressing these concerns.

Missing or Misplaced Motivations for Skepticism

Dinitia Smith's recent *New York Times* story about Paul Kurtz provides a good example of the kind of oversight that

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concerns me. ('A Vigorous Skeptic of Everything but Fact.' *New York Times,* Arts Section, June 19, 2002. I do not mean to imply that the oversight to be discussed is in some way a deliberate omission on the part of Ms. Smith.) The article presents Kurtz as 'A Vigorous Skeptic of Everything but Fact,' but provides no compelling account of what skepticism is and why someone might adopt a skeptical perspective. Instead, the article presents Kurtz as a curmudgeonly crusader against 'everything but fact.' Insofar as Kurtz's targets – TV mediums, alternative medicine purveyors, UFO-ologists, and such – take their claims to be statements of fact, this characterization is at best unhelpful, and at worst misleading. The unanalyzed appeal to 'fact' is potentially misleading because it is so easily construed as signaling an unquestioning devotion to the authority of science, or, more precisely, to the authority of some scientific result or theory. In this way, the skeptic is misconstrued as just another salesman obediently peddling a world-view and uninviting slogans such as 'We are the heroic defenders of science and reason.' As the skeptical world-view of science and reason seems to many a pallid and dreary substitute for the fantastical worlds of alien visitation, psychic detectives, and astral projection, skeptics often come off as intellectual wet-noodles or party-poopers. Worse still, they come off as close-minded dogmatists out to discredit anything that does not coincide with their 'facts.'

This perception of the skeptic was evident on the *Larry King Live* show of September 3rd, 2001. On this evening, King's guests were alleged psychic-medium Sylvia Browne and world-renowned skeptic James Randi. (The transcript is posted at: http://www.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0109/03/lkl.00.html. Quotations come from this transcript.) On the show, Sylvia Browne accused Randi of 'bigotry' because his appeal to 'facts' left him with 'no belief system' and no 'god center.' Given his spiritually impoverished condition, Browne admitted to feeling sorry for the godless and 'lonely' Randi. Callers to the show that night repeated these accusations, and also expressed their pity towards Randi. To Sylvia Browne and the callers on *Larry King Live*, Randi's cool appeals to evidence,

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scientific data, facts and reason came to nothing more than narrow-mindedness in the service of an uninspired and cold view of the world. The skeptic hence seems pitiable creature indeed: How could anyone be so perverse as to adopt a depressing worldview when there are so many other, happier views one could adopt? Why be a skeptic?

Skepticism as a Stance

What the callers and Sylvia Browne have not understood, and what Dinitia Smith's article does not help to clarify, is that there is a fundamental philosophical difference between the position of the skeptic and that of the believer in, say, John Edward's ability to communicate with the dead. To see the difference, consider that the Edward believer is committed to the following belief,

(1) *John Edward communicates with the dead.*

Contrast this with what I shall call the *stance* of the skeptic with regard to John Edward, which is this,

(2) *One should believe that John Edward communicates with the dead only if there is sufficient evidence to support the claim that he communicates with the dead.*

Note that the skeptical position is actually a *stance* towards the belief (1) that Edward communicates with the dead. We may generalize from (2) the following characterization of the skeptical stance,

(3) *For any proposition, p, one should believe p only if there is sufficient evidence for p.*

That is, the skeptic is committed to a certain view about *the conditions under which one ought to believe a given proposition*. Because the conditions specified in (3) are not met with regard to (1), the skeptic rejects (1). Hence we might say

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that skepticism is therefore not a belief, but rather a *way of believing*.

Sylvia Browne was in a sense correct when she accused James Randi of having 'no belief system.' It is of course not the case that Randi has no beliefs, and it is not the case that his beliefs are not systematic. As a skeptic, Randi has no 'belief system' insofar as skepticism is in itself committed to no particular beliefs about the world; it is rather committed to a certain view *about* beliefs and when to hold them. The principal commitment of the skeptic, then, lies not in the maintenance of some particular belief or 'belief system'; the skeptic is primarily committed the principle identified in (3), namely, that one's belief should follow, be responsive to, the evidence.

The skeptic's position is therefore far removed from the perception often encouraged in the popular media, where skeptics are portrayed as merely being enemies of certain beliefs about the world. Typically, skeptics are presented as opponents of religious belief, belief in paranormal phenomena, and belief in spiritual entities. However, skeptics are actually only indirectly concerned with the specific beliefs one may have about the world. The main focus of the skeptic's criticism is rather the epistemological habits or ways of believing that lead one to accept a belief in, say, Bigfoot or John Edward's ability to communicate with the dead. The skeptic's criticism of the Edward believer is not that Edward's claim to be able to communicate with the dead is necessarily false because it does not fit with the skeptic's scientific worldview. Rather, the skeptic argues that the best way of believing we have recommends that we do not accept the belief that Edward communicates with the dead because the evidence in support of Edward's claim is not sufficient.

Note that the skeptic's argument leaves open the possibility that sufficient evidence for Edward's claims might come at some point in the future. Hence the skeptic must remain open to the possibility that Edward's claims are indeed true; but he will not invest his belief in Edward's claims until there is sufficient evidence of their truth. Nonetheless, the question of Edward's ability to communicate with the dead will, in

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principle at least, remain an *open question*, and the skeptic's belief that Edward *cannot* communicate with the dead will remain a *hypothesis*. Thus skeptics must always be ready to reevaluate their beliefs on the basis of new evidence, and they must always be on the look out for such evidence as would confirm Edward's claims. If there is good reason to believe that Edward communicates with the dead, the skeptic wants to know, and he will be ready to accept Edward's claims if such evidence presents itself.

The skeptical stance is therefore a piece with what we may call *anti-dogmatism*. Whereas the dogmatist is committed to the preservation of a certain set of beliefs about the world, the skeptic is committed only to a way of evaluating proposed beliefs about the world. Whereas the dogmatist's commitment to the preservation of his beliefs leads him to avoid, or discount, or ignore possible sources of disconfirmation, the skeptic's way of believing instructs him to *test* his beliefs by deliberately seeking out disconfirming evidence. Whereas the dogmatist's need to avoid disconfirmation leads him to try to generate agreement among the people he associates with through any means available, the skeptic thrives on respectful and reasoned disagreement, open argument, and cooperative inquiry.

So we may characterize the intellectual motivations for adopting the skeptical stance as based in two fundamental, and I think non-controversial, claims:

(a) We aim to adopt beliefs which are not simply comforting or convenient, but true.
(b) None of us is infallible.

Given our condition as indicated in these two claims, the best strategy for generating beliefs will at once help us to get true beliefs and help us to correct our false beliefs. The skeptical stance is designed to meet these requirements. First, insofar as the skeptical stance requires that our beliefs be responsive to evidence, it is designed to generate beliefs which, even if not always true, *tend* towards the truth. Second,

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insofar as it requires continuing and perpetual reevaluation and reexamination as more evidence is gathered, it accounts for fallibility by being self-correcting. We may summarize these respective motivations with the following terms, *evidentialism* and *fallibilism*.

Hence we see that, contrary to popular perception, it is the anti-skeptic, not the skeptic, that is dogmatic and closed-minded. The skeptic's fallibilism requires that he be open to *changing his mind* about things; in fact, he must seek out reasons to do so. By contrast, the anti-skeptic rejects fallibilism and wants most of all to *preserve* her beliefs at all costs, and as such must close her mind to competing beliefs. Moreover, it is the skeptic who truly celebrates differences of opinion, disagreements, and dialogue among people. The skeptic's evidentialism bids him to take seriously the fact that others hold beliefs different from his own, and to take seriously the possibility that those others may hold beliefs that are closer to the truth than his own. As such, the skeptic is driven to *examine* his beliefs and those of others. The dogmatic anti-skeptic must dismiss those who hold beliefs that differ from her own, she must employ some strategy to *avoid* taking seriously the contrary beliefs of others. As Sylvia Browne's behavior on *Larry King Live* demonstrates, where this strategy of avoidance fails, the anti-skeptic must attempt to discredit those with whom she disagrees. Lastly, it is the skeptic, not the anti-skeptic, who promotes an empowering and hopeful vision of our position in the universe. Whereas the anti-skeptic sees the world as shrouded in ultimate unintelligibility and takes herself to live at the mercy of unfathomable and inexplicable forces, the skeptic places his trust in the power of collective human intelligence to understand and improve the world.

Skepticism and the Democratic Ideal

I have thus far discussed only the intellectual motivations for skepticism. I have tried to show that the skeptical stance is the appropriate way of believing given human fallibility and the aim of truth. Once the position of the skeptic is seen in light of these considerations, it is clear that the popular perception of

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the skeptic is badly mistaken. I want in the present section to discuss a different, but certainly related motivation for skepticism. Namely, I want to elucidate the connection between the skeptical way of believing with what I shall call the 'democratic ideal.' Again, this crucial aspect of the skeptical position is unfortunately overlooked in popular presentations.

Let me begin with a line of questioning that has often been posed to me even after the intellectual motivations for skepticism have been presented. Someone may concede that skepticism is the most appropriate way of believing yet object to the attempts of skeptics to attack the alternate, and admittedly inferior, ways of believing that others have adopted. The point is sometimes framed as a objection to what is seen as the efforts of skeptics to *proselytize* via their debunking efforts. Why do skeptics insist on trying to spread their way of believing? Why do they challenge different ways of belief? Why does the skeptic seem to want everyone to be a skeptic? Why won't skeptics just leave alleged psychics alone? Isn't it enough for the skeptic to know that psychics are frauds? Why must they interfere with others' ways of believing?

When I am presented with this line of objection, I typically respond by asking my interlocutor to consider the following scenario: Suppose you are on trial for a murder of which you are innocent. You are being tried before a jury of your peers. After strong evidence for your innocence has been presented, the jury retires to generate a verdict. Now I ask, what would you think if the jury decided to base their verdict not on the evidence presented, but instead on the declarations of a psychic? Would you think the jury had acted irresponsibly? Would you want your fate to be decided in this way, or would you rather have the jury base their verdict upon the evidence? Almost no one I've spoken to is willing to say that they'd prefer that the jury consult the psychic.

This exercise makes clear the essential connection between skepticism and democracy, and thereby explains the political motivations for skepticism. We often think of democracy in terms of the individual freedoms it allows each to enjoy, and we praise democracy for giving an equal voice to all citizens.

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These are indeed great virtues of a democratic political order. However, correlative to these essential liberties are great responsibilities. In a political system in which each has an equal voice, the *quality* of the belief-forming processes that determine what each voice will say is a *concern for all*. The jury scenario provides but one very clear example of why this is so. There are other obvious examples, and in fact, one could say that the entire machinery of democracy is based upon the premise that citizens will accept the responsibility to consult reasons and evidence in producing their political judgments. In the words of one prominent contemporary political theorist, democracy aspires to be a 'republic of reasons.' Familiar democratic institutions, such as the system of checks and balances, division of powers, the First Amendment, and open elections, both *secure* the conditions under which a 'republic of reasons' can emerge and *enable* reasons and evidence to direct political decision.

Of course, the image of a 'republic of reasons' is not intended to be a description of how actual democratic citizens operate; it is rather an *ideal* of democracy, something to strive for within existing democratic conditions. If the condition of existing democracies may be evaluated by reference to this ideal, then we may conclude that democracy in the United States today is faltering. Citizen ignorance of the fundamental operations of their government is dangerously high, voter turn out is dangerously low, and the quality of political discourse as presented in the popular media is offensively juvenile. According to the skeptic, part of the problem has to do with the widespread predominance of inappropriate ways of believing. If astrologers can foretell the future, there's no need to deliberate about major life decisions; if John Edward can help you reconcile with dead relatives, there's no need to bond with those who are living in relationships of mutual support and respect; if angels are watching over you, there's no need to think seriously about moral dilemmas; if God has guaranteed personal salvation, there's no need to join others in the attempt to rectify injustice here and now.

The skeptic is hence also motivated by a certain political

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commitment or social mission, namely, that of realizing the democratic ideal of a political order based upon the open deliberation of citizens who are free and equal. The skeptical way of believing is the intellectual prerequisite for democracy. It is for this reason that the skeptic must undertake the social mission of challenging those ways of believing that lead one to accept the claims of alleged psychics, faith healers, UFO-ologists, holistic therapists, and others. Such ways of believing are essentially anti-democratic; they undermine collective liberty by promoting in the individual habits of intellectual servility.

Representing Skepticism

I have identified and explicated two kinds of considerations which motivate skeptics to take their stance. Combining them, we may say that skepticism is an intellectual stance based in human fallibility and committed to human liberty. As I emphasized earlier in this essay, the skeptical position is often presented in the media as consisting of a collection of claims about the world: *there are no psychics, there are no spiritual beings, holistic medicine is a sham, no UFOs have visited Earth*, etc. Of course, skeptics are committed to these claims, but this commitment is generated by the skeptical way of believing, and this way of believing is the core skeptical commitment. As long as the public misperception of skepticism as primarily a set of specific beliefs about the world prevails, skeptics have failed their social mission. Unless we can promote the correct view of skepticism within the context of popular media, our efforts to popularize our stance will be in vain.

Thus the question we now face is this: given the impracticality of getting mainstream media coverage sufficient for launching a full explication of the skeptical stance such as has been offered in this essay, how ought skeptics represent skepticism in popular forums? I hope in this essay to have convinced fellow skeptics that this is an important question for skeptics to begin thinking about collectively, and I hope to see more discussion of among skeptics. I shall close this essay with an initial suggestion in response to the question.

I contend that when addressing a popular forum, skeptics

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should adopt what I shall call, for reasons I suspect will be obvious, the 'Socratic strategy.' That is, the skeptic should, like Socrates, focus not on establishing claims of his own but rather upon exposing the groundlessness of the claims of his interlocutors. Plato's Socratic dialogues, which feature the Socratic method of the *elenchus*, could not be bettered as exemplars of this strategy. In this way, skeptics will be 'the heroic defenders of science and reason' in the sense that they will insist that claims be backed up with sufficient support, and that those who promote fantastic claims be called upon to provide such support. In the absence of sufficient support, the skeptic must conclude simply that he has no good reason to accept the claim.

Some may worry about my suggestion; the Socratic strategy may strike some as less forceful and gripping than the alternate strategy which recommends that skeptics begin from their beliefs about the non-existence of psychics, angels, ghosts, and such. There is something to this worry. Socratic skeptics cannot indulge the impulse to call Sylvia Browne a fraud and John Edward a con-artist, and this may be seen as a costly sacrifice of rhetorical power, especially in the context of popular media where rhetoric reigns. The Socratic strategy is admittedly less rhetorical than other approaches; however, I think the skeptic *should* avoid rhetorical grandstanding. The skeptic's primary concern should be to *demonstrate* the skeptical way of believing, to *promote* proper intellectual process by providing an *example* of it. The Socratic strategy may seem less effective if we think only of the short-run objective of exposing a Sylvia Browne or a John Edward, but our long-run concern should be to make it less likely that future self-professed psychic mediums will *need* exposing. The long-run objective is better served by the Socratic strategy insofar as it attempts to cultivate within the population the skeptical stance rather than the skeptical conclusions regarding some particular charlatan.

Robert B. Talisse is associate professor of philosophy at Vanderbilt University.

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