

Resurrecting the Classic Skeptic
Defining Beliefs from a Classic Skeptic Perspective
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Abstract

The Classic Sceptics of ancient Greece established a rigorously empirical philosophical system, that was neither nihilistic nor sophistic. While a Classic Sceptic perspective seemingly disappeared from human memory, some of the techniques of the system have been integrated into Modern mainstream thought. Parallels between the perspective and bliss of an idealized “sage” seen in Sceptic, Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist texts. Definitions of a “Belief Line” and a “Belief Circle” as visual aids to understanding various belief systems and differing perspectives on belief. Evidence presented by Korczynski and Jaynes supports a Classic Sceptic perspective as conducive to semantic adjustment in the Post-Modern era.

History of Classic Sceptics

When an empire grew to meet peoples, cultures, and belief-systems, new perspectives were discovered that didn't fit into prior understandings. Alexander the Great's army left Greece and traveled through Syria, Persia, India and back over several years (334-324 BCE). Pyrrho of Elea/Elis/Ellis (c.360-270 BCE) journeyed with Alexander's army, and written records say that he met with naked wise-men and “magi” in India. When Pyrrho returned, he had a new perspective.

It is said that Pyrrho left no writings, and there seems some controversy over exactly what he might have said or meant, but it seems clear that a new strain of thought to Greece arrived with Pyrrho in ~300 BCE and remained in Greece and Rome until at least ~200 CE. There was an “Academic” period of the Sceptic tradition, and many historians of philosophy seem to focus their attention on irresolvable debates as to what one faction or another of the Academy might have meant by a certain phrase.

We may never know why a Classic Sceptic perspective failed to survive as a living tradition much past the period of Sextus Empiricus (who wrote “Outlines of Pyrrhonism” c.200 CE). We may speculate whether active suppression by the Catholic church was sufficient, or if other factors were significant. Among fervent believers, such as dark-age Catholics, it seems that a Classic Sceptic perspective would be conceived of as fundamentally intolerable, and as perhaps the “ultimate heresy” in refusing to accept any beliefs or faiths whatsoever.

The fact remains that a Classic Sceptic perspective disappeared, while many of the Classic Sceptic logical techniques maintained some continuity through to the Modern era, where they were found to be highly useful for scientific inquiry. We may consider the Modern era as beginning with theory (Galileo, Descartes) or practice (steam engine, railroad, etc...).

If we consider theories describing the beginning of Post-Modernity, there are many antecedents. In 1933, Korczynski did an excellent job of collecting new scientific evidence and obtaining novel abstractions thereof, as shown by this quote first dealing with mind-body, and then dealing with space-time¹:

It is interesting to note that the effect does not depend on “knowing”, as similar results happen when the subject knows the conditions of the experiment. The last shows that the experiment deals with a physiological and neurological mechanism. In general terms, if we vary the time-interval in the opposite sense from the space-interval, the latter will be distorted, showing once more the structural fact that in actual life and experience we deal exclusively with the four-dimensional space-time order, which, as such, must have physiological and neurological significance, and an adapting mechanism.

When Post-Modern theory began may be contentious, but in practice, the Post-Modern Era began precisely at 5:29:46 A.M. July 16, 1945 at White Sands Missile Range, New Mexico on the occasion of “Trinity” the world’s first atomic explosion². Any Classic or Modern dogma suggesting matter inherently separate from energy was proven “false to facts”.

MODERN	POST-MODERN
Galileo, Descartes	Einstein, Heisenberg
Classic Physics, Absolute Reference Frames	Quantum Physics, Relativity implicit
Period Table of the Elements, Rigid Order	Matter-Energy conversion, Conditional Order
Mind/Body arbitrary division	Mind-Body-Emotion continuum
Aristotelian logic, Us vs. Them	Non-Aristotelian logic, Interdependence

The Post-Modern Era arrives with the end of certainties, absolute reference frames, and the appropriateness of Aristotelian thought. A Classic Skeptic perspective seems an excellent support for such a Post-Modern life, particularly when living in a empire that confronts dogmatically incompatible colonial cultures.

Definitions of Sceptics and Believers

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED, 2nd.ed.1989, Vol. XIV, pp.610) chooses as the first definition under “sceptic” (alternative, English, spelling), “*Philos.* One who, like Pyrrho and his followers in Greek antiquity, doubts the possibility of real knowledge of any kind; one who holds that there are no adequate grounds for certainty as to the truth of any proposition whatever.”

However, on the same page (*ibid.*), the OED mistakenly chooses the following for the first definition of “scepticism”: “*Philos.* The doctrine of the Sceptics; the opinion that real knowledge of any kind is unattainable.” A Skeptic doctrine was recorded as a body of instruction to show that the logical flaws in any belief preclude persuasion. However, to be clear, there is no record of a Skeptic dogma of any sort.

Skeptics do not assert that knowledge is unattainable, for that would be Nihilism, only that knowledge of “ultimates” or “absolutes” remains (to date) unproven. The OED’s second entry for “nihilism” reads, “*Philos.* A. An extreme form of scepticism, involving the denial of all existence.” The mis-association of Skeptic thought with Nihilism was clearly a problem back in the Classic Era³:

*“Chapter X.—Do the Sceptics Abolish Appearances?
Those who say that ‘the Sceptics abolish appearances,’ or phenomena, seem to me to be unacquainted with the statements of our School...And when we question*

whether the underlying object is such as it appears, we grant the fact that it appears, and our doubt does not concern the appearance itself but the account given of that appearance,—and that is a different thing from questioning the appearance itself.”

If a Classic Skeptic has no doctrine or belief, then by what criteria are decisions made in life? By the rational abstractions taken from empiric evidence to date, a Skeptic conditionally considers that sense-impressions may be trusted, and that the most logically probable explanation for events is likely to be correct. However, a Classic Skeptic does not make a “leap of faith” into believing in something, does not transform a probability into a certainty, and does not assume the arbitrary existence of “timeless absolutes” such as Platonic Ideals, God, or Mathematical Equations⁴:

*“Chapter XXIII.—Of the Expression “I DETERMINE NOTHING”
Regarding the phrase “I determine nothing” this is what we say. We hold that “to determine” is not simply to state a thing but to put forward something non-evident combined with assent. For in this sense, no doubt, it will be found that the Sceptic determines nothing, not even the very proposition “I determine nothing”; for this is not a dogmatic assumption, but an expression indicative of our own mental condition.”*

Again, a Classic Skeptic does not believe in anything, and does not believe in nothing.

Categories of Belief

Some people say they know something is True, and they assert this positively. Such a person we call a “Dogmatist”, whether asserting god(s) exist as a “Theist” (Monotheist, Polytheist, Pantheist, etc...), or asserting that no god(s) exist as an “Atheist”. All foundations for any Theist or Atheist belief system are dogmatic, for all²⁰⁰³ upon close examination, reveal logical fallacies (circular logic, blatant assertion, ad infinitum, etc.). Among Classic Greek systems, Stoics, Epicureans, and Aristotelians all fall into the category of dogmatic believers. We may use the logic of one belief system against another to reveal logical fallacies, and thus refute Dogmatists.

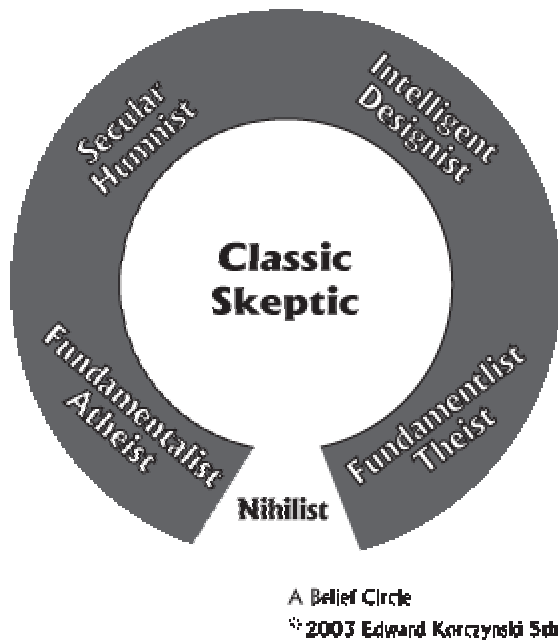
To refute “Nihilists”, we need only present “empiric evidence” as a likely concept. Failing at the conceptual level, we may reduce the levels of abstraction and physically pummel them until they admit the likely existence of empiric evidence as pain.

Given the range of different beliefs known²⁰⁰³, we can posit a metaphorical Belief Line segment upon whose opposite ends we place labels for “Fundamentalist Atheist” and “Fundamentalist Theist”. Along this posited line we can then try to place all manner of beliefs, so that we have some sort of a series of labels along the line like the following:

- Fundamentalist Atheist
- Relativist Atheist
- Secular Humanist
- Intelligent Designist
- Relativist Theist

- Fundamentalist Theist

The crux of the misunderstanding turns upon where do you place a Classic Skeptic label in relation to the other labels on this hypothetical line. Most people who hold to a belief system somewhere along the line seemingly can only conceive one-dimensionally along a straight line, and therefore logically (within the arbitrary one-dimensional constraint) assert that “Classic Skeptic” must be placed somewhere in the middle with “Secular Humanist” and “Intelligent Designist”.



However, from a Classic Skeptic perspective, no association can be found with part or parts of any hypothetical belief line, and the label “Classic Skeptic” should indeed be placed in the middle—but not of a straight line, of a circle. In fact, a belief line can be considered as a nearly-circular arc with the two ends separated by only a few degrees of missing arc; the “Nihilist” extreme negation belief (that nothing can be known) is located in the space between the two “Fundamentalist” extreme assertion beliefs (that God exists, or God doesn’t exist). The “Skeptic” sits in equipoise in the middle of the circle, equally unmoved by any argument in any direction of belief, and able to see opposing arguments to any advanced from any direction.

Again, from the perspective of a believer who cannot conceive of any perspective outside of a belief, a Skeptic who claims to hold no belief is logically reduced to being a liar, and thus a Sophist. “sophism” (*OED2nd Ed.*, Vol.XVI, pp.8) “1. A specious but fallacious argument, either used deliberately in order to deceive or mislead, or employed as a means of displaying ingenuity in reasoning.”

Thus, a Skeptic perspective has been misunderstood and severely misrepresented for over 2300 years. When “Modern Era” scientific and industrial practice began sometime in the early part of the 19th century, practitioners of the physical sciences learned that a Classic Skeptic logic could be very practical in determining relatively mundane points of fact. Thus most people today consider themselves “skeptical” of something within someone else’s belief system, but fail to appreciate the value of applying skeptical arguments against all of their own un-examined beliefs. Some people even call themselves “Modern Skeptics” or “Scientific Skeptics” though they hold to materialists beliefs.

Julian Jaynes¹⁹⁷⁶ contemplated the Modern Era search for a “method of authorization” to somehow replace fundamentalist religion⁵:

“For the modern intellectual landscape is informed with the same needs, and often in its larger contours goes through the same quasi-religious gestures, though in a slightly disguised form. These scientisms, as I shall call them, are clusters of scientific ideas, which come together and almost surprise themselves into creeds of belief, scientific mythologies which fill the very felt void left by the divorce of science and religion in our time,”

Further in the paragraph he continues:

“In return the adherent receives what the religions had once given him more universally: a world view, a hierarchy of importances, and an auguring place where he may find out what to do and think, in short, a total explanation of man. And this totality is obtained not by actually explaining everything, but by an encasement of its activity, a severe and absolute restriction of attention, such that everything that is not explained is not in view.”

Beliefs provide some beneficial function in human society, such as the establishment of a group identity to promote cohesion, and the emotional comfort of simplistic certainty in the face of often baffling experience. The identification function could be fulfilled by participation as a fan at group social events such as watching sports or entertainment. The emotional comfort function may be best addressed by some manner of a regimen in General Semantics to minimize disconnects between mental maps and experiences.

However, any possible value derived from a belief comes at a heavy price:

- Mental blinders to new experiences, and
- Susceptible to manipulation by “leaders” of the belief.

Any belief also inherently invites conflict with anyone who holds an opposing belief. On a small personal scale, this may result in an argument over sports or politics with a friend or co-worker, but this may reach pathological levels when beliefs drive millions to their deaths in wars. From a Classic Skeptic perspective, any belief or belief system must involve, at least to some extent, what Korzybski¹⁹³³ termed “false doctrine”⁶:

“Animals have no ‘doctrines’ in our meaning of the term; thus, doctrines are no part of their environment, and, accordingly, animals cannot perish through false doctrines. We do have them, however, and, since they are the most vital environmental semantic conditions regulating our lives, if they are fallacious, they make our lives unadjusted and so, ultimately, lead to non-survival.”

What do I have instead of belief? A conditional perspective that I could term pragmatic relativistic materialism, though I do not turn this perspective into a belief. I have nothing invested in this concept, and I needn’t waste effort in defending it against anyone else who may say I’m wrong. I may well be wrong, but for now²⁰⁰³, this seems the most likely. I don’t worry about it, and thus avoid endless stress and concern.

As stated very succinctly by Raymond Gozzi, Jr. in a paper titled “Metaphor in Action”⁷:

Many meditative exercises in both Hindu and Buddhist traditions aim toward this detachment – separating out the superimposed elements of our metaphoric awareness. This can be quite difficult – knowing that one should do something is not the same as being able to do it. However, both traditions assure us that this detachment is possible, and that it leads to contentment and bliss even here in this life.

In his extended comic diatribe against fundamentalist materialists⁸, Robert Anton Wilson (after Korzybski) provides an excellent critique of any variety of a belief system (metaphoric or “emic reality”) seen as artificially superimposed onto a more primal/fundament existential “etic reality”:

“Existential or etic “reality”—the reality of daily life—the “reality” of experience, sensory-sensual “reality,” as distinguished from the assumed “real” “reality” of various philosophers—appears then to be too interactive and synergetic to reduce to Aristotelian either/or choices. It fits more adequately into Buddhist logic: It is real. It is not real. It is both real and unreal. It is neither real nor unreal.”

Dudjom Rinpoche describes the Prasangika Madhyamaka view⁹ of Classic Indian Buddhism that arrived in Tibet ~1000 years ago:

“In this way, the ultimate truth is characterized as the essence free from all conceptual elaborations of the subject-object dichotomy, in which all the stains of the mind and its mental events are quiescent in the expanse of reality, and which is not extraneously perceived (because it is not discursive thought of words, phrases and other such particular existents). Ultimate truth is also characterized as the abiding nature of reality which is beyond thought, free from all conceptual elaborations, and untouched by philosophical systems.”

Ataraxia, Equanimity, Equipoise, Quiescence, Quietude

I’ve heard a Tibetan folk saying that goes something like this in English, “If two philosophers meet and agree on anything then one of them is not a philosopher, and if two sages meet and disagree about anything then one of them is not a sage.”

In China ~2500 years ago, Lao Tzu, the legendary founder of Taoism, is purported to have written¹⁰ the following poetic description of a Taoist sage that is strikingly similar to the descriptions of Classic Sceptics:

“Therefore the sage keeps to the deed that consists in taking no action and practices the teaching that uses no words.”

In Greece ~1800 years ago, Sextus Empiricus summarized his definition of a Sceptic path and result: give up on whatever dogma/beliefs you hold, without taking on any replacements, and in the “space” remaining, you will begin to experience a pervasive bliss and contentment. He also described the mundane benefits and the practical applications of the Classic Sceptic perspective¹¹:

“Accordingly, the Sceptic, seeing so great a diversity of usages, suspends judgment as to the natural existence of anything good or bad or (in general) fit or unfit to be done, therein abstaining from the rashness of dogmatism; and he follows undogmatically the ordinary rules of life, and because of this he remains impassive in respect of matters of opinion, while in conditions that are necessitated his emotions are moderate; for though, as a human being, he suffers emotion through his senses, yet because he does not also opine that what he suffers is evil by nature, the emotion he suffers is moderate.”

Conclusion

A Classic Sceptic’s doubt doesn’t come from ignorance, nor is a Classic Sceptic’s bliss derived from ignorance. On the contrary, after considering a great number of different beliefs, nothing has been found in the aggregate but contradictions, blatant assertions, and cultural ephemera useful for group identification. Choosing “none of the above” from a hypothetical list of beliefs, a Classic Sceptic remains happily unmoved in the metaphorical center of debate among belief systems, relying upon conditional relative experience in life. With no beliefs to defend or to motivate violent aggression toward others, a Classic Sceptic perspective seems most appropriate for semantic adjustment in the Post-Modern Era.

Biography

Edward Korczynski 5th was born in 1963 at Detroit, Michigan, U.S.A.; after receiving a B.Sc. degree in Materials Science and Engineering from MIT, worked in the semiconductor IC manufacturing industry; practices meditation and studied philosophy with Tibetan Buddhists for over 10 years; plays music; rides motorcycles.

¹ *Science and Sanity...*; Alfred Korzybski; 1933; pp.325; The Science Press Printing Company, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, U.S.A.

² National Atomic Museum, Albuquerque, New Mexico, U.S.A.

³ *Outlines of Pyrrhonism, I. by Sextus Empiricus*; trans. Rev. R. G. Bury, Litt.D, Loeb Classic Library; 1933; pp.15; Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, U.S.A.

⁴ *Outlines of Pyrrhonism, I. by Sextus Empiricus*; trans. Rev. R. G. Bury, Litt.D, Loeb Classic Library; 1933; pp.115; Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, U.S.A.

⁵ *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*; Julian Jaynes; 1976; pp.441; Houghton Mifflin, Boston, Massachusetts, U.S.A.

⁶ *Science and Sanity...*; Alfred Korzybski; 1933; pp.239-240; The Science Press Printing Company, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, U.S.A.

⁷ *Metaphor in Action*, Raymond Gozzi, Jr.; 2000; ETC.Vol.57, No.4; International Society for General Semantics, Concord, California, U.S.A.

⁸ *The New Inquisition: Irrational Rationalism and the Citadel of Science*; Robert Anton Wilson; 1987; pp.193; Falcon Press, Phoenix, Arizona, U.S.A.

⁹ *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism: Its Fundamentals and History*; Dudjom Rinpoche; 1991; pp.167; Wisdom Publications, Boston, U.S.A.

¹⁰ *Lao Tzu; Tao Te Ching Book1, Verse6*; trans. D. C. Lau; 1963; pp. 58; Penguin Books, Middlesex, England.

¹¹ *Outlines of Pyrrhonism, I. by Sextus Empiricus*; trans. Rev. R. G. Bury, Litt.D, Loeb Classic Library; 1933; pp.485; Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, U.S.A.