3.2: Skepticism

Our first step involves being skeptical of new ideas and arguments. When someone tells you something or you read it over the internet or see it on television, are you more likely to believe it or disbelieve it? As long as it does not clash with previous beliefs we hold, science suggests that we are more likely to accept new information. In fact, in order to understand a new concept our minds must first accept the concept to even understand what it means.

In a landmark 1991 paper, Harvard psychologist Dan Gilbert proposed that we process information in two steps. First, we accept information as true, and then we interrogate whether it may actually be false. In other words, we let the Trojan horse past the gate before we check to see if it's full of Greek soldiers. “Humans,” wrote Gilbert, are “very credulous creatures who find it very easy to believe and very difficult to doubt.”

*Cognitive Science Offers Tools To Rebuff Climate Deniers* ¹

As Dan Gilbert argues, understanding a new idea requires two steps.

- Accept that the new information is accurate to understand the new ideas.
- Once the ideas are understood, then test them to see if they are accurate.

**Silence Does Not Always Mean Consent, Especially in Romance**

Silence means consent is not an actual legal term and should not actually be relied on for all situations. This is especially accurate when “romance” is involved. More and more social situations, however, demand that if romantic advances are being made by an individual, that person must receive an affirmation of those advances before the romance is continued. Silence here does not mean consent.
But as you might imagine, once we accept the accuracy of a concept it becomes a challenge to then reject it. Since we are naturally prone to accept new information, our human nature is not to be initially skeptical. Being skeptical is a skill we must develop.

Our skepticism skill is challenged even more when we are presented with many “lies.” Again, Jeremy Deaton writes:

- Human brains are built to ward off singular untruths, but we struggle against an army. When faced with an onslaught of lies, our defenses falter, letting alternative facts slip past the barricade. There are several reasons why this is the case. Here are three:
  - It takes energy to scrutinize a lie.
  - It takes more energy to scrutinize it when we hear that lie again and again.
  - We don’t like to scrutinize a lie that supports our worldview.²

There is a misconception over what it means to be skeptical and I am guessing that now is a good time to clearly define what it means to be skeptical. Michael Shermer is the publisher of Skeptic magazine and is frequently asked what it means to be a skeptic. He answers this question by saying,

As the publisher of Skeptic magazine, I am often asked what I mean by skepticism, and if I’m skeptical of everything or if I actually believe anything. Skepticism is not a position that you stake out ahead of time and stick to no matter what.

...science and skepticism are synonymous, and in both cases, it’s okay to change your mind if the evidence changes. It all comes down to this question: What are the facts in support or against a particular claim?

There is also a popular notion that skeptics are closed-minded. Some even call us cynics. In principle, skeptics are neither closed-minded nor cynical. We are curious but cautious.³

This passage by Shermer points out four key thoughts about skeptics:

- No position is staked out ahead of time. This allows for you to examine the argument with an open mind and then decide whether you accept it or reject it.
- Skepticism follows the procedure of scientific inquiry looking to see if the evidence provided in the argument adequately supports the claim.
- It is okay to change your mind. You may have one position, but after listening to a new argument, with new and additional evidence you can now make a better decision and actually changing your mind is a good thing.
- Skeptics are not cynics. Instead Skeptics are curious, but are cautious and resist leaping to a comfortable conclusion.

An additional and often used method of learning a concept is to look at the origin of a word. For those of you who want to impress your friends, the term for this is etymology. The Basics of Philosophy website has a nice, brief examination of the term skeptic.

The term is derived from the Greek verb “skeptomai” (which means “to look carefully, to reflect”), and the early Greek Skeptics were known as the Skeptikoi. In everyday usage, Skepticism refers to an attitude of doubt or incredulity, either in general or toward a particular object, or to any doubting or questioning attitude or state of mind. It is effectively the opposite of dogmatism, the idea that established beliefs are not to be disputed, doubted
I like the idea that this passage clearly states that being a skeptic is the opposite of being dogmatic.

Jamie Hale describes the difference between being cynical and being a skeptic.

“Cynics are distrustful of any advice or information that they do not agree with themselves. Cynics do not accept any claim that challenges their belief system. While skeptics are open-minded and try to eliminate personal biases, cynics hold negative views and are not open to evidence that refutes their beliefs. Cynicism often leads to dogmatism.”

He continues by stating that dogmatism “opposes independent thinking and reason.” If we want to be successful critical thinkers we need to become much more skeptical and less cynical.

In his TEDTalk Michael Shermer explains the relationship between the process of skepticism and science.

Skeptics question the validity of a particular claim by calling for evidence to prove or disprove it. In other words, skeptics are from Missouri -- the "Show Me" state. When we skeptics hear a fantastic claim, we say, "That's interesting, show me the evidence for it."

A key goal here is to encourage you to be more skeptical. Instead of blindly accepting or rejecting claims made by others, take the time to demand proof. Make the person or organization prove the claim they are making. And remember, you need to be open minded when listening to the argument.

Over three centuries ago the French philosopher and skeptic René Descartes, after one of the most thorough skeptical purges in intellectual history, concluded that he knew one thing for certain: “Cogito ergo sum” — “I think therefore I am.”

By a similar analysis, to be human is to think. Therefore, to paraphrase Descartes: Sum Ergo Cogito — I Am Therefore I
An effective critical thinker who is successful in arguing is a person who is more skeptical of the messages they receive. This advice is not just for those who wish to be argumentative. This advice is for every citizen.

“What we all need, as citizens, is to develop more skill in applying our skepticism. We need to spot false narratives, and also turn aside those who would replace them with pure fiction. Either we get this right or we cease to be free citizens.”

The problem we all experience is that it is not natural to be skeptical. Our natural state is to either flee a conflict or stand and argue. This can be explained by how our brains are structured.

Reference