

Skepticism, Cognitive Health, and Practical Wisdom

“A healthy scepticism while in a car dealership will keep you from buying a ‘lemon’. An unhealthy scepticism might prevent you from obtaining a reliable means of transport.”

--Bill Shipley, from *Cause and Correlation in Biology: a User's Guide To Path Analysis, Structural Equations and Causal Inference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 5).

Introduction

Bill Shipley is right: sometimes skepticism is healthy, and sometimes it's not. While he draws this distinction only in passing, preoccupied as he is with other important matters (with arguing, for instance, that causality in biology can be inferred from correlation without randomized experiments), his comment is pregnant with practical wisdom, more perhaps than Shipley himself realized. The aim of this paper is therefore to do some midwifery. Instead of treating skepticism as a problem to be solved, or, to go to the other extreme, of treating it as some kind of unalloyed good or virtue, my aim is to explore when skepticism is healthy and when it is not.

Some Preliminaries

Before we begin our exploration, three clarifications are in order concerning this paper's scope.

First, it will not be a concern of this paper to answer skeptical challenges to our knowledge of the external world or of other minds, or other such skeptical issues. I shall assume that there is much that we know. For instance, I know that I'm writing this now, that there is an oak tree outside my office window, that $1 + 1 = 2$, that you my reader exist, and the list goes on. I leave it to you to assemble a similar list for yourself.

Skepticism, Cognitive Health, and Practical Wisdom

Second, you will not find in this paper a new analysis of “knowledge.” I shall suppose that something in the ballpark of the justified true belief account is correct, but I shall not argue for that here, nor attempt to solve the Gettier Problem.¹

Third, I shall understand skepticism as an attitude whereby one denies that some claim or other can be known to be true or justifiably believed.²

Immune Systems: Physiological and Cognitive

With the above clarifications in mind, let’s begin our exploration. A fruitful way of conceptualizing skepticism is to think of it as an immune system: skepticism is (or at least is an integral part of) a kind of cognitive immune system that protects the mind from infection by false (or unjustified) beliefs, analogous to the way in which an organism’s physiological immune system helps it fight off infection by microbial or viral agents. While having a well-functioning physiological immune system is integral to the physiological health of an organism, so too having a well-functioning cognitive immune system is integral to the cognitive health of one’s mind.³

An immune system, however, may malfunction. Physiologically, this can happen when the immune system rejects inoffensive agents (such as pollen or cat dander as is the case with allergies) or rejects the organism’s own cells or tissue (as in the case with auto-immune diseases such as arthritis or multiple sclerosis). In such cases, the physiological immune system goes into overdrive to the detriment of the organism’s physiological health. Similarly, a cognitive immune system can go into overdrive by rejecting claims that are true (or justified) as false (or unjustified) or rejecting already held true (or justified) beliefs as false (or unjustified), and it does so to the detriment of the mind’s cognitive health.

In light of this analogy, entitling this paper “A Public Health Approach to Skepticism” would only be partly facetious, for there is much to be said in favor of regarding skepticism from a public health approach, one concerned not primarily with the physiological health of organisms but with the cognitive health of minds (although both can be intertwined). Analogous to how a physiological infection in one organism may spread to others, a *cognitive infection* in one mind may spread to others through the transmission and propagation of false or unjustified beliefs. And analogous to how a physiological immune deficiency in one organism may instantiate a more widely-distributed one in a given population, a *cognitive immune deficiency* in one mind may instantiate a more widely distributed one as well. The cognitive health of one mind may be intertwined with the cognitive health of others; hence, our allusion to a public health approach.

In keeping with this theme, let me offer some cases illustrating unhealthy and healthy forms of skepticism. The cases are by no means exhaustive, and there is significant overlap between them. They strike me as reasonably uncontroversial, and I hope they will strike you that way as well. We’ll begin with some cases of unhealthy skepticism.

Four Cases of Unhealthy Skepticism

1. *The Holocaust Denier*. Despite overwhelming evidence that the Holocaust happened, the Holocaust Denier skeptically denies that one can know or be justified in believing that it did, and attempts via numerous publications and presentations to spread this skepticism to others.⁴

2. *The Obfuscatory Industrialist*. Despite mounting scientific evidence that substance Ω produced by his company is harmful to non-human animals, humans, and even to the broader ecosystem, the Obfuscatory Industrialist skeptically denies that one can know or be justified in

believing this, and even attempts to fund controverting studies and promote their dissemination in the media, all the while cloaking his agenda in the disinterested garb of “scientific debate.”⁵

3. *The Parti Pris Partisan.* Fanatically devoted to her political party, the Parti Pris Partisan only listens and reads the views of her own party and related media outlets, and skeptically denies the truth or justification of any alternative view that could call her own into question.⁶

4. *The Conspiracy Theorist.* The leader of country C believes that the CIA has deliberately created AIDS to kill people in his country and continent, and that the use of anti-retroviral drugs is part of this plot to spread AIDS. He skeptically denies the truth or justification of alternative views, and blocks the implementation of AIDS prevention programs in his country. This results in hundreds of thousands of deaths that might have been prevented.⁷

What These Cases of Unhealthy Skepticism Have in Common

Despite differences in detail, notice that a pattern emerges from the cases above. In each, a skeptical attitude comes intertwined with an agenda (whether conscious or unconscious) inimical to genuine pursuit of the truth of the matter. To generalize (though cautiously and tentatively), what appears to be a defining characteristic of unhealthy skepticism is that its denial that some claim can be known to be true (or justifiably believed) comes untempered by a genuine desire for knowledge (or justification). Curiously, and somewhat paradoxically, it’s also interesting to note that those who evince unhealthy skeptical attitudes often also tend to be gullible or insufficiently skeptical with regard to claims that appear to confirm their antecedently held views. As the recent American health care debate shows us, some (though of course not all) of the very skeptics about the benefits of health care reform may uncritically believe in wild conspiracy

Skepticism, Cognitive Health, and Practical Wisdom

theories involving death panels or the President having a Nazi agenda. Unhealthy skepticism and gullibility are often symbionts. Also worth noting is that while the cases above may offer particularly glaring examples of unhealthy skepticism, the manifestation of this attitude is not an all or nothing affair, and each of us is susceptible to it to some degree or other with regard to some subject matter or other. Just as we should guard against gullibility, we should guard against unhealthy skepticism. So let's turn next to some cases of healthy skepticism.

Four Cases of Healthy Skepticism

1. *The Careful Car Buyer.* While listening to the claims of the Used Car Dealer about the virtues of the various cars on the Dealer's lot, the Careful Car Buyer takes them with a grain of salt, and seeks out independent evaluations of the car she is considering buying.

2. *The Cautious Child.* Though a stranger entices him to come into his car, the Cautious Child refuses to accept as true the assurances of the stranger, refuses to go with him, and goes instead to tell his parents.

3. *The Wary Advertisement Reader.* Since the advertisement extolling the merits of Product *P* appears too good to be true, the Wary Advertisement Reader refuses to believe its claims without consulting neutral sources.

4. *The Guarded Scientist.* Despite its widespread acceptance, the Guarded Scientist refuses to accept Theory *T* in light of the countervailing evidence she has found against it.

What These Cases of Healthy Skepticism Have in Common

Notice how a pattern also emerges from our four cases of healthy skepticism. For despite the differences in detail, the skeptical attitude evinced in each case is not intertwined with an agenda

Skepticism, Cognitive Health, and Practical Wisdom

inimical to the pursuit of truth of the matter. Quite the contrary. To generalize (though cautiously and tentatively) once more, what appears to be a defining characteristic of healthy skepticism is that its denial that some claim can be known to be true (or justifiably believed) comes tempered by a genuine desire for knowledge (or justification). Healthy skepticism guards against gullibility. And (as with unhealthy skepticism) the manifestation of this attitude is not an all or nothing affair. Each of us probably manifests it to some degree or other with regard to some subject matter or other. Since healthy skepticism is presumably good for our cognitive health or well-being both individually and collectively, we ought to cultivate it in ourselves and in others. In this light, let's consider how credence and skepticism may coincide.

How Healthy Skepticism and Healthy Credence Coincide

Since we've talked above about how healthy skepticism guards against gullibility, it's worth noting that while gullibility is a progenitor of ignorance, so too is unhealthy skepticism. For insofar as knowledge and ignorance are opposites, and insofar as belief is necessary for knowledge, to the extent that skepticism is corrosive to belief, it is corrosive to knowledge as well. Thus is an unhealthy skepticism also a progenitor of ignorance. By contrast, healthy skepticism coincides with healthy credence: healthy credence, like healthy skepticism, avoids the extremes of doxastic intemperance (= gullibility or unhealthy credence) on the one hand, and closed-mindedness or cynicism (= unhealthy skepticism) on the other. 'Healthy skepticism' and 'healthy credence' both designate a doxastic mean between extremes that is an important aim, I submit, of practical wisdom in belief. To reinforce this point, let me apply these notions to what may seem at first blush to be an unlikely trio: romantic love, hypothesis testing, and hermeneutics.

Skepticism, Cognitive Health, and Practical Wisdom

Romantic Love. Those who have suffered the pain of a broken heart know how badly one can be hurt in love. One way of protecting oneself against such hurt is to be so chary in loving as to be closed to it. But such a reaction comes at the high cost of our potentially missing out on the delight and good of loving and being loved in return. So too, while an unhealthy skepticism may protect one from false belief, if it does so at the cost of the potential delight and good of knowledge, the cost will have been high indeed. Healthy skepticism/credence by contrast is like a prudent love, neither promiscuous in it nor closed to it either.⁸

Hypothesis Testing. Ideally in hypothesis testing one wishes to avoid both false positives and false negatives. An obsession with avoiding false positives, however, may lead to accepting too many false negatives, and vice versa. Ideally, then, the risk of false positives in hypothesis testing ought to be balanced against the risk of false negatives.⁹ So too, healthy skepticism or credence strives to temper the aversion to falsehood with the desire for truth. Unhealthy skepticism, by contrast, fails to so temper aversion with desire, and unhealthy credence fails to so temper desire with aversion.

Hermeneutics. The literary critic enamored with the hermeneutics of suspicion may indeed succeed in ferreting out and rejecting objectionable assumptions and prejudices in literary works. But a hermeneutics of suspicion untempered by a hermeneutics of trust or openness is like a literary scorched earth policy, whereas a hermeneutics of trust or openness untempered by a hermeneutics of suspicion is like a policy of letting a thousand weeds bloom. Healthy skepticism and credence, like practical wisdom in literary criticism, tempers suspicion with trust and openness. Unhealthy skepticism, on the other hand, fails to so temper suspicion, and unhealthy credence fails to so temper trust or openness.¹⁰

Skepticism, Cognitive Health, and Practical Wisdom

Some Concluding Thoughts

The approach taken in this paper has not been to regard skepticism as a problem to be solved, but rather as an attitude to be cultivated and tempered. In taking this approach, I do not mean to suggest that there is no value at all in pursuing the resolution of skeptical problems concerning the external world or other minds or what have you. Let's be mindful, however, of the opportunity cost of doing so: since the dawn of the early modern period, epistemology has been so obsessed with solving such skeptical problems that, in contrast with ancient epistemology, the relationship between skepticism and practical wisdom has garnered nowhere near the attention it deserves. The aim of this paper has been to draw to it precisely such attention, but *not* by calling for a return to the suspension of judgment (or *epoche*) advocated by the Academic and Pyrrhonian skeptic of old. The skeptical attitude called for here does not take skepticism to be antithetical to an attitude of credence. Rather, it takes both to be conducive to our individual and collective cognitive health when recognized and cultivated as complementary. Thus may we attain practical wisdom in belief, the welcome progeny of the marriage of credence and skepticism.

NOTES

¹ This does not mean that I have nothing to say on these matters, but this is not the occasion.

² My disjunctive expression “known or justifiably believed” is not intended to equate knowledge with (mere) justified belief. Skepticism regarding justified belief is broader than skepticism regarding knowledge, but this distinction does not materially affect my main thesis.

³ My contrast between physiological and cognitive immune systems doesn’t turn on assuming a mind-body duality. I am not presupposing that the cognitive immune system is not in some sense of other physiologically grounded. I just draw the contrast to facilitate discussion. By “cognitive health,” I mean a mind properly attuned to important truths about itself and its world, and generally capable of distinguishing such truths from falsehoods. I shall have to leave a proper discussion of cognitive health to another occasion.

⁴ The infamous Ernst Zündel is a paradigmatic example of a Holocaust Denier.

⁵ For real life examples of obfuscatory industrialists, see Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner’s *Deceit and Denial: The Deadly Politics of Industrial Pollution* (University of California Press, 2003)

⁶ The shocking levels of ignorance and misinformation manifested at town hall meetings concerning the current health care debate provide telling examples of such unhealthy skepticism.

⁷ Readers will no doubt recognize that I’m alluding to Thabo Mbeki here. See W.M. Gumede’s *Thabo Mbeki and the Battle for the Soul of the ANC*, 2nd ed. (Zed books, 2008).

⁸ To be sure, once one is in a genuine loving relationship, the attitude of credence will and should eclipse the attitude of skepticism. My point is applicable primarily to the pursuit and beginnings of a relationship of romantic love.

⁹ Of course, there may be good reasons in many cases to be more concerned with false negatives than positives (or vice versa).

¹⁰ I recognize that some literary works may call for much more of a hermeneutics of suspicion than a hermeneutics of trust (or vice versa). For an interesting discussion and overview of the hermeneutics of suspicion, see Brian Leiter's "The Hermeneutics of Suspicion: Recovering Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud" in *The Future of Philosophy* ed. Leiter (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004): 74-105. For an interesting discussion and overview of the hermeneutics of trust (especially concerned with the work of Gadamer and Ricoeur), see Robert Dostal's "The World Never Lost: The Hermeneutics of Trust," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 47(3), (1987): 413-434.