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# Skepticism and Happiness

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## Marvin Kohl

**S**kepticism can range from a complete and total disbelief in everything; to Humean skepticism, which maintains that individuals cannot ever obtain knowledge about any subject matter beyond the relationship of their ideas or sense-data; to the kind of over-belief that claims we should always disbelieve what is false and that, where we do not have sufficient supporting data, we ought to suspend judgment. I refer to the latter kind of doubt as agnostic skepticism or simply as skepticism, and will be content to limit this analysis to this species of disbelief.

Bertrand Russell, one of the great patrons of rationalism and secular humanism, was an agnostic skeptic. If only men could be brought into a tentatively agnostic frame of mind, he writes,

nine-tenths of the evils of the modern world would be cured. War would become impossible, because each side would realize that both sides must be wrong. Persecution would cease. Education would aim at expanding the mind, not at narrowing it. Men would be chosen for jobs on account of fitness to do the work, not because they followed the irrational dogmas of those in power. Thus rational doubt alone, if it could be generated, would suffice to introduce the millennium.<sup>1</sup>

What is this wonderful thing that would initiate a period of prevailing virtue and happiness? What is skepticism? And why do skeptics consider it the height of wisdom to place stringent limits on what can be rationally believed?

I believe that Russell's skepticism is a complex notion involving several distinct claims and not always even referring to the same subject matter. Yet several things are clear. First of all, he does not advocate an absolutist's position. For example, he does not claim, as W. K. Clifford does, that "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."<sup>2</sup> Russell seems to have understood that if it is wrong, presumably everywhere and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence and

if, as the facts reveal, we have insufficient evidence for believing this, then agnostic skeptics must reject their own meta-belief. The apparent paradox is that, if the absolutist's version of agnostic skepticism is true, then intellectual integrity requires that it be cast aside.

But Russell's position cannot be taken by this argument, since he does not hold that *all* beliefs are subject to the skeptic's sword. In a 1904 letter, he clearly distinguishes between propositions that may be fairly allowed to be self-evident and propositions that ought to have proofs if they are to be accepted. In other words, Russell appears to hold that certain foundational beliefs aside, it is wrong to believe anything upon insufficient evidence. He thought the letter sufficiently important to quote it at length in the first volume of his autobiography. In this early and rather remarkable letter Russell writes that "truthfulness demands as imperatively that we should doubt what is doubtful as that we should disbelieve what is false."<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the clearest and most ardent contemporary spokesperson for this form of skepticism is Paul Kurtz, who reminds us that "whatever else he may be, the humanist is, at root, a skeptic."<sup>4</sup>

The skeptical person asks for proof and demands evidence; he tests claims by how well they work out in practice. His antidote for the original sin [of gullibility] is critical analysis. . . . [Most important, the skeptic maintains that] where we do not have sufficient supporting data, we ought to suspend judgment. We should be doubtful of whatever has not been adequately verified.<sup>5</sup>

For the skeptic, then: Truthfulness demands that we only believe something to be true when the claim is supported by reliable evidence. It also demands as imperatively that we should doubt what is doubtful as that we should disbelieve what is false. The first statement is true but tautological. The second may be true and also tautological if truthfulness necessarily includes a richer notion of intellectual integrity. The difficulty is this: even if truthfulness demands that we be skeptics, it does not follow that happiness demands the same thing.

Great ideals may, and often do, conflict. Truthfulness may command that where there is insufficient or no evidence, one ought to disbelieve or at least suspend belief, while happiness may command much less. If we distinguish between affective (psychological) and the reflective (judgmental) modes of happiness,<sup>6</sup> then affective happiness often demands little by the way of truth. Affective happiness, one might say, is inextricably disposed to love illusion and delusion. If we also



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distinguish between individual and universal categories of happiness, then this may clarify the nature of the dispute between the skeptic and more ardent believer but in itself does little to alleviate the worry that, even when we move from individual and affective life-satisfaction to universal and judgmental life-satisfaction, happiness does not become as stringent an intellectual mistress as skeptics would have us believe.

Does happiness require that we be skeptics? In other words, is it true to say that happiness demands, aside from foundational beliefs, that we only believe something to be true when the claim is supported by reliable evidence and that happiness also demands as imperatively that, aside from foundational beliefs, we should doubt what is doubtful as that we should disbelieve what is false?

I suggest that these statements may be false, or are at least doubtful, because evidence indicates that many of the ingredients which make for individual human happiness require that we do *not* believe it is wrong to believe anything upon insufficient evidence. Expressed positively, there is evidence to show that many of the more vital and happier people give full assent to propositions, including beliefs about hope and self-worth, without having sufficient warrant from what may be called reality.

Shelley Taylor and Jonathan Brown argue that there is a substantial amount of evidence indicating that *some* illusions (and I suspect *some* false beliefs) promote mental health, including the ability to be happy.<sup>3</sup> They suggest that unrealistic views—including the belief that one controls what is indeed uncontrollable and the having of a mild unrealistic optimism—may be necessary factors for happiness and contentment, the ability to care for others, and the capacity for creative productive work. They also suggest that unhappiness often seems to be correlated with having too much of a commitment to truthfulness. For example, Taylor and Brown maintain that mildly depressed individuals or those with low self-esteem are *less likely* to be dependent upon illusion and *more likely* to have more accurate self-perceptions. Or to state this more provocatively and in our own language, healthy and happy people are more likely to be dependent upon illusion and less likely to be across-the-board agnostic skeptics.

This empirical claim cannot be easily dismissed. The argument it suggests may be telling if we add the premise that happiness is an overriding good. It may be telling if in the short *and* long run, happiness requires that we reject not only the extreme form of skepticism but those positions which maintain that certain foundational beliefs aside, it is wrong to believe anything upon insufficient evidence. Or when viewed from a different moral perspective, a related argument against the more strident forms of skepticism may be telling if there is a need to be deceived in certain strategic psychological areas and if the violation of this need, in balance, results in greater human ill-being and suffering.

There are those, I suppose, who fancy that my emphasis on certain strategic psychological needs, specifically the need to have hope and a strong sense of self-worth together with their corresponding beliefs, represents a departure from

skepticism and, therefore, from humanism. Nothing could be further from the truth. What we need to vividly recall is that humanism does not solely rest on epistemological grounds. It has two major foundations: love and knowledge. And this love is not merely egoistic love. It is true that since a creature must live before it can act, the acts by which each maintains his or her own life must generally precede in imperativeness all other acts. But from this it does not follow that a person would place his or her own happiness or other interests above that of all other persons. Nor does it follow that we have a positive moral obligation to distribute goods, wherever possible, first to oneself and second, where possible, to our fellow humans who are in need and within range of our activities. This, at bottom and in practice, is nothing more than an insouciant but cleverly disguised closet form of radical egoism. What follows is that if there are duties to self, we have a positive moral obligation to distribute *vital goods*, wherever possible, first to oneself. And that in other areas we may be morally required to make our greatest possible contribution to the overall good.

To love humanity is to be actively concerned about protecting and increasing what makes for human happiness. If love, not epistemology, comes first and if the nature of the universe is presently such that happiness requires a mixture of true and palliative beliefs, then a humanism properly understood requires a less narrow and more carefully modified form of skepticism. For me humanism is a system of thought and action, a proto-theory that makes human welfare and happiness the measure and end of all moral and political endeavors. "Welfare" here roughly means the minimal satisfaction and protection of the means of satisfying basic needs and correlate interests, as well as the fundamental interests a society would want to protect if it were inspired by love and were fully rational. Correspondingly, "individual happiness" means the more durable forms of life-satisfaction that results from both the appreciation and attainment of reasonable and progressive success in meeting these needs and their correlating interests over a significant period of time or over a lifetime. If this is true, then it is part of wisdom to note that happiness requires a more humane skepticism, which does not attack certain foundational and vital psychological beliefs.

To sum up: If we dare speak of such a powerful marriage, truthfulness and happiness seem to require that, aside from certain foundational and vital psychological beliefs, we should always disbelieve what is false and that, where we do not have sufficient supporting data, we ought not give full assent to, or ought to doubt, the proposition in question.

I do not mean to suggest that this ends a needed inquiry as to the limits of skepticism and what it may be rational to believe when full supporting data are not available. There are other questions of considerable importance. Why are certain foundational and psychological beliefs and not others acceptable, and upon what grounds? Why it is important to distinguish, as I think we must, between not giving full assent to a proposition and doubting that proposition? And why will this narrowing of the scope of skepticism not necessarily result in a dangerous slide into credulity or gullibility?

It is not my intent to answer these questions. Instead I am content to suggest that, since we are still in a very early, if not primitive, stage of understanding the proper limits of belief, our claims about ethical or warranted belief should be proportionately modest; that wisdom suggests that we avoid the dogmas of skepticism as well as the dogmas of metaphysical or religious belief; and that if doxastic responsibility requires examining the consequences of belief, as I believe it does, then the results of skepticism are reasons for believing or not believing in skepticism.

It may be said that I have begged an important question: that the evidence will indicate that in the short and long run human happiness does require that it is wrong to believe anything upon insufficient evidence; that credulity and gullibility are contagious; that unless these demons are forcefully constrained, our powers of self-control, of doubting, of judiciously and fairly weighing evidence are dangerously and irreversibly weakened. Critics may also urge that enduring virtue and happiness cannot be taught by teaching falsehood, illusion, or half-belief; that the ardent love of truth is the basis of all real happiness, and that a happiness based upon lies can only do harm. For no good cause is ever served by the suppression of truth. Critics probably would add that most, if not all, of what passes for psychological illusion is merely immediate and short-term appeasement which cannot, on balance, provide for long-term stable happiness. And the more zealous would urge that a happiness based upon what are essentially comforting lies "cannot in any way be a true happiness."<sup>9</sup>

I am tempted to say that these are eulogistic phrases resorted to in behalf of skepticism as dogma. But that, no doubt, is too harsh. What we are in fact being told is that the possible future utility of the more extreme forms of skepticism clearly outweighs the known and present utility of less rigorous forms of belief; that there is a difference between narrow and partial ends and full and far-reaching ends; between the success

of the few for the moment and the happiness of the many for an enduring time. This, of course, is a serious claim. But notice that it purports to be an empirical one that, strictly speaking, we do not know to be true, and about which we should therefore be skeptical.

I do not, however, wish to conclude on this cavalier note. Perhaps the best way to illustrate the poignancy of the "happiness versus truth" problem is to close with James Thurber's fable about "The Moth and the Star."<sup>10</sup>

A young and impressionable moth once set his heart on a certain star. He told his mother about this and she counselled him to set his heart on a bridge lamp instead. "Stars aren't the thing to hang around," she said; "lamps are the thing to hang around." "You get somewhere that way," said the moth's father. "You don't get anywhere chasing stars." But the moth would not heed the words of either parent. Every evening at dusk when the star came out he would start flying toward it and every morning at dawn he would crawl back home worn out with his vain endeavors. One day his father said to him, "You haven't burned a wing in months, boy, and it looks to me as if you were never going to. All your brothers have been badly burned flying around house lamps. Come on, now, get out of here and get yourself scorched! A big strapping moth like you without a mark on him!"

The moth left his father's house, but he would not fly around street lamps and he would not fly around house lamps. He went right on trying to reach the star, which was four and one-third light years, or twenty-five trillion miles, away. The moth thought it was just caught in the top branches of an elm. He never did reach the star, but he went right on trying, night after night, and when he was a very, very old moth he began to think that he really had reached the star and he went around saying so. This gave him a deep and lasting pleasure, and he lived to a great old age. His parents and his brothers and his sisters had all been burned to death when they were quite young.

Moral: Who flies afar from the sphere of our sorrow is here today and here tomorrow.

#### Notes

1. Bertrand Russell, *Skeptical Essays* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1928), 155.
2. W. K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, Baruch A. Brody (ed.) (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 246. Reprinted from Clifford's *Lectures and Essays*, 1879.
3. *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell 1872-1914*, vol. 1 (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1956), 289-290.
4. Paul Kurtz, *Exuberance: A Philosophy of Happiness* (Buffalo and New York: Prometheus Books, 1977), 63.
5. *Ibid.*, 61, 66.
6. Nicholas Rescher, "Rationality and Happiness," in *Rationality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 210-223.
7. I hold happiness at its best to be reflective in nature, that is, to be a combination of subjective and objective conditions. Like Russell and Kurtz, I reject the extreme mentalism that holds if you believe in something and it brings you a sense of subjective well being that is all that matters. For a fuller discussion of the nature of happiness, see my essay "Russell and the Attainability of Happiness," *International Studies in Philosophy* 16:3 (1984), 14-24.
8. Shelley E. Taylor and Jonathan D. Brown, "Illusion and Well-Being: A Social Psychological Perspective on Mental Health," *Psychological Bulletin* 103:2 (1988), 193-210.
9. I am indebted to Jeffrey Miers for his point.
10. James Thurber, *Fables for Our Time* (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1943), 19.