

## **Gambler's Philosophical Method: Skepticism as a Clarification Tool**

by Norman Schultz

In the present age of mega-information, it is becoming increasingly important to be discriminating. I don't mean discriminating in the negative sense, as in against persons or ideas due to prejudice--I mean possessing the ability to screen out useful information from garbage, the sales pitch from the true product knowledge, the sinister from the sincere, or more basically, the truth from falsehood. Often falsehood can be difficult to detect. Yet I believe that some basic philosophical methods, specifically skeptical methods, can greatly help in the task of filtration and clarification.

To illustrate the point that accuracy of a so-called fact can be surprisingly in question, I will site Bear Mountain in the state of Connecticut. A person visiting Bear Mountain could find a run-down stone monument on the top dating to the late 1900's labeling the peak as "The highest point in Connecticut", a height of 2,316 feet. The people of Connecticut *knew* that it was the tallest peak in the state and thusly built a monument to recognize this fact. In recent times, though, more accurate measuring equipment has arisen, equipment that recognizes that the slope of Frissell Mountain reaches a height of 2,380 feet, beating out Bear Mountain by about 64 feet. So what the Connecticut citizens *knew* in the late 1900's turned out to be false knowledge. What people *know* may not actually be knowledge at all. (Feder, p.10)

A good start to finding accuracy is the ability to break down a subject to its most basic assumptions, to simplify it. Instead of quickly recognizing an argument as applicable, a skeptic will "boil" the matter down to a minimum with the hope that what is left will be easier to handle objectively. Plato's Meno showed that Socrates had an uncanny ability to derive the more basic issues of a topic. In this dialog between Socrates and the young man whom the story is named after, the question of virtue is discussed. Early in the story, Socrates uses skepticism to break down an answer that Meno gives to the question, "What *is* virtue?" Meno tells Socrates of the things that are

virtuous of a man, a woman, a child, a political leader, and so on. Socrates detects that these did not clarify the issue at all, "... the virtues, however many and different they may be, they have all a common nature which makes them virtues; and on this he who would answer the question, "What is virtue?" would do well to have his eye fixed: Do you understand?" By being alert to Meno's answer, which did not actually provide a *definition* of virtue but merely a list of virtuous actions, Socrates avoided subscription to it before being convinced of its relevance. His skeptical outlook provided a means for simplifying the discussion. (Plato, p.2)

A person could apply this method beyond philosophical debate and into real life actions. For instance, a majority of people dislike interaction with any public offices, i.e. college Admissions office, or the DMV. A flood of unpleasantness pours through the mind at the thought of their services--standing in line, filling out paperwork, getting "lost in the shuffle". This negative attitude is often expressed as frustration and often finds outlet at the expense of the office workers behind the counter. A more skeptical look at the problem will reveal two *separate* entities, the office organization structure and the people that work in the office. The unpleasant procedures that cause the frustration fall under the realm of the office structure and *not* the office workers, therefore any expression of that frustration to the latter is misguided. Only a focus on the actual source of the problem could possibly bring any results.

The benefits of skepticism are also found in the direct pursuit of accuracy. The doubting methodology that Renee Descartes formulated demonstrates how skepticism can be used effectively to establish accurate truth. His idea was 'I will doubt everything that can be doubted and whatever is left, if anything, will be absolute truth. By doing so, I will detect a criterion of truth that can subsequently be applied to other topics.' (Moore & Bruder, p.67). Descartes' Dream Conjecture and Evil Demon Conjecture provide extreme examples of how he used skepticism as a tool for clarification. The reasoning of the two conjectures goes like this; A person may believe that his

immediate surroundings are real, after all, he can see and touch them. But how does the person know he is not dreaming? He could awaken and find that nothing he was experiencing was real, only a creation of his unconscious mind. Therefore, everything the person experiences in a frame of time could come into question as to its actual reality. Still, temporarily casting our senses totally aside, a person could perceive that some things are inherently true, dreaming or not dreaming, such as a circle must be round and  $2+2=4$ . But, can the person be sure that an evil demon has not created such concepts as a plot to trick him into believing an untruth? Therefore, even the knowledge that seems to us to be self-evident could also be brought into question as to its truthfulness; it is possible to find skeptical thought in almost anything. The truth that Descartes *did* arrive at via his doubting methodology is this; "I think, therefore I am." In other words, in order for a person to doubt his own existence, the person *must* exist. If not, there would be no originator for the question of his existence. I feel that Descartes' reasoning is a powerful demonstration of the usefulness of skepticism as a tool for removing any possibly shaky reasoning.

Some, though, reject skepticism entirely, viewing it as a way out of ideological commitment. History provides a partial verification of this flaw. The early Skeptics of the third century BC took the view to an extreme. Some theorized that nothing can be known. Others, such as Sextus Empiricus one of the last of the Pyrrhonist skeptics, revised the theory to say "he did know whether or not knowledge is possible." Both views, I believe, do not have a good influence on ones powers of reason. Instead of provide the thinker with tools to help discern real facts, this extreme skepticism attempts to render any debate as moot. Most, though, recognize that balance is needed and do not subscribe to either of the above beliefs.

However, it could reasonably be said that absolute truth can seldom be known, in which the next best thing would be to increase the *odds* that something is true. The title of this paper mentions the "Gambler's Philosophical Method." A good gambler is not just lucky. A good gambler knows

the deck thoroughly, counts cards, and is always calculating his best move--he does all these things even though there is no way of *knowing* what card will next be turned up. His philosophy is to increase the *odds* of turning a good hand, a hand he would to a lesser or greater degree expect. I think this well illustrates the goal of a person engaged in a philosophical discussion, debate, or project. The closer a person can get to accuracy, the more confident one can be to commit to that philosophy and to the behavioral changes that may come with it.

Having discussed the methods of skepticism as a means to removing inapplicable arguments, as a tool for increasing clarity, and the fact that accuracy with high probability is better than no accuracy, hopefully the reader of this work will see the overall benefits of a balanced skeptical outlook. It's funny that in an age that uses a "How To . ." book for almost everything, a discussion of how to find correct answers and establish accuracy is seldom covered. Most people would like to understand the world. Do our lives have purpose and if so what is it? How did we begin? Where and what is the mind? Why does the human race often seem to be in turmoil? It is noble to consider such things and entertain solutions. Yet simply having a desire to know the answers to these questions does not ensure that a person will find any good ones. Oh, a person will find many answers offered, but how does one determine which is right? "Skeptical scrutiny is the means, in both science and religion, by which deep thoughts can be winnowed from deep nonsense." (Carl Sagan, p.364)

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