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QUESTIONS THAT MATTER

AN INVITATION TO PHILOSOPHY

FOURTH EDITION

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SKEPTICISM

We may begin with *skepticism*, a fitting place to begin inasmuch as it calls into question, in various ways and degrees, the very possibility of knowledge. The word “skepticism” comes from a Greek word which means “to reflect on,” “consider,” or “examine,” so it is not surprising that it is usually associated with *doubting* or *suspending judgment*. A glance at the dictionary shows that, beyond being *doubters*, skeptics come in many varieties. We, however, wish to distinguish just three types or levels of skepticism.

The meaning of
“skepticism”

VARIETIES OF SKEPTICISM

If a skeptic is someone who at one time or another had doubts or who suspends judgment about something, then all of us are skeptics. None of us can know everything, and you yourself would surely be skeptical about someone who claimed that he or she did. A dose of *commonsense* skepticism is indeed probably *healthy* for us. For one thing, it is a corrective to gullibility, superstition, and prejudice. All of us should rightfully be skeptical of the claim that a vast herd of giraffes is at this moment roaming the White House, or of certain promises made by politicians running for office. Skepticism is also an antidote to intellectual arrogance and presumption.

Commonsense
skepticism

Clearly, skepticism in this form poses no problem—if anything it stimulates and enhances philosophical activity. But with *philosophical* skepticism

Philosophical
skepticism

skep • tic (skep'tik) *n.* **1.** One who doubts, disbelieves, or disagrees with generally accepted conclusions in science, philosophy, etc. **2.** One who by nature doubts or questions what he or she hears, reads, etc. **3.** One who questions the fundamental doctrines of a religion, especially the Christian religion. **4.** *Sometimes cap.* An adherent of any philosophical school of skepticism. Also spelled *sceptic*. [sceptique < L *scepticus* or directly < LGk. *skeptikos* reflexive < *skeptesthai* to consider]

—**Syn.** *Skeptical*, *freethinker*, *atheist*, *unbeliever*, and *agnostic* denote one who denies or doubts some prevailing religious or philosophical doctrine. *Skeptical* is a general term, and refers to a person who does not feel that the state of human knowledge, or the evidence available, is sufficient to establish the doctrine. A *freethinker* is one who refuses to accept a doctrine, especially a religious doctrine, simply on authority, and demands empiric proof. *Atheist* describes one who denies the existence of God; an *unbeliever* may also lack religious faith, but the word is more often applied to one whose faith is different from that of the speaker. An *agnostic* rejects a doctrine because he or she believes that human knowledge is, and always will be, incapable of determining its truth or falsity.

Skep • tic (skep'tik) *n.* In ancient Greek philosophy, a member of a school of skepticism, especially that of Pyrrho of Elis. [

skep • ti • cal (skep'ti • kəl) *adj.* **1.** Doubting; questioning; disbelieving. **2.** Of, pertaining to, or characteristic of a skeptic or skepticism. Also spelled *sceptical*.—**skep'ti • cal • ly** *adv.*—**skepti • cal • ness** *n.*

skepti • cism (skep'tə • siz'əm) *n.* **1.** A doubting or incredulous state of mind; disbelieving attitude. **2.** *Philos.* The doctrine that absolute knowledge is unattainable and that judgments must be continually questioned and doubted in order to attain approximate or relative certainty; opposed to *dogmatism*. Also spelled *scepticism*.—**Syn.** See DOUBT.

the plot thickens. By philosophical skepticism we do not mean any particular position or movement in philosophy, but the tendency of some philosophers to deny or doubt the more cherished philosophical claims. What are some of these claims? It depends, of course, on the particular philosopher, but at one time or another it has been denied or doubted that every event must have a cause, that God exists, that there are underlying substances, that the external world is as we perceive it to be, and the like. (It is this sense of skepticism which we saw in the Introduction as typical of the "tough-minded" philosopher: "Seeing is believing!") These issues, of course, are the really big ones in philosophy, and skepticism over such issues immediately marks out the boundaries of philosophical battlefields.

Absolute skepticism

Still more troublesome is what we might call *absolute* skepticism. What is denied or doubted here is the very possibility of knowledge itself. Believe it or not, there have been some thinkers (not many, but some) who have denied that we can know anything at all.

Surely the best example of this was Pyrrho of Elis (about 300 B.C.), who founded a school of philosophers who called themselves the *Skeptics*. Pyrrho appealed to the example of Socrates, who, in spite of his insistence on abiding truths, was always *asking questions*, and Plato, who, aside from his belief in the transcendent Forms, believed that our knowledge of the world about us was really only an *approximation* or *opinion*. A more legitimate source of Pyrrho's skepticism was the Sophists with their view that all knowledge is subjective and relative, and therefore that there is no *absolute* or *common* knowledge at all. Recall Protagoras: "A man is the measure of all things." And long before Pyrrho ever came on the scene, the Sophist Gorgias of Leontini (about 525 B.C.) expounded a skepticism about as absolute as could be imagined. His position—or nonposition—is expressed in his three theses that (1) nothing exists, (2) if something did exist, we could never know it, and (3) if we could know it, we could never express it.

Pyrrho and his followers taught that nothing whatsoever is certain, and therefore that the wise man will suspend judgment on all matters, or, at best, simply announce, "The matter *appears* to be thus and so." As with Protagoras, the evidence for the Skeptics that nothing whatsoever can be known

Pyrrho, the absolute skeptic, who denied that we can know anything whatsoever.





The argument for skepticism

with certainty amounts to an extended argument from the *relativity* of reason, sense perception, and custom. Just consider how different our thoughts and our sense perceptions can be about the *same things*! Did two people ever see the same rainbow? How does an onion taste? And if disagreements and contradictions rage over ordinary things "out there," like rainbows and onions, how much more do they rage over intellectual and moral perceptions? The differences and contradictions stemming from our time, place, age, condition, perspective, sense faculties, intellectual faculties, social situations, inclinations, desires, purposes—all of these added up, for the Sceptics, to gigantic doubt and led to a suspension of judgment concerning *everything*.

Much of what we know about Pyrrho we know through the ancient philosophical biographer Diogenes Laertius. In the following from Diogenes' *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, he states the radicalness of Pyrrhonic skepticism and then summarizes the famous *Ten Modes* (or "ways") leading to skepticism.

The Skeptics . . . were constantly engaged in overthrowing the dogmas of all schools, but enunciated none themselves; and though they would go so far as to bring forward and expound the dogmas of the others, they themselves laid down nothing definitely, not even the laying down of nothing.

The Ten Modes of Doubt

I. Based on the Variety in Animals

The *first* mode relates to the differences between living creatures in respect of those things which give them pleasure or pain, or are useful or harmful to them. By this it is inferred that they do not receive the same impressions from the same things, with the result that such a conflict necessarily leads to suspension of judgment. . . . Some are distinguished in one way, some in another, and for this reason they differ in their senses also, hawks for instance being most keen-sighted, and dogs having a most acute sense of smell. It is natural that if the senses, e.g., eyes, of animals differ, so also will the impressions produced upon them. . . .

II. Based on the Differences in Human Beings

The *second* mode has reference to the natures and idiosyncrasies of men; for instance, Demophon, Alexander's butler, used to get warm in the shade and shiver in the sun. Andron of Argos is reported by Aristotle to have travelled across the waterless deserts of Libya without drinking. Moreover, one man fancies the profession of medicine, another farming, and another commerce; and the same ways of life are injurious to one man but beneficial to another; from which it follows that judgment must be suspended.

III. Based on the Different Structures of the Organs of Sense

The *third* mode depends on the differences between the sense-channels in different cases, for an apple gives the impression of being pale yellow in color to the sight, sweet in taste and fragrant in smell. An object of the same shape is made to appear different by differences in the mirrors reflecting it. Thus it follows that what appears is no more such and such a thing than something different.

IV. Based on the Circumstantial Conditions

The *fourth* mode is that due to differences of condition and to changes in general; for instance, health, illness, sleep, waking, joy, sorrow, youth, old age, courage, fear, want, fullness, hate, love, heat, cold, to say nothing of breathing freely and having the passages obstructed. The impressions received thus appear to vary according to the nature of the conditions. . . .

V. Based on the Disciplines and Customs and Laws, the Legendary Beliefs and the Dogmatic Convictions

The *fifth* mode is derived from customs, laws, belief in myths, compacts between nations and dogmatic assumptions. This class includes considerations with regard to things beautiful and ugly, true and false, good and bad, with regard to the gods, and with regard to the coming into being and the pass-

ing away of the world of phenomena. Obviously the same thing is regarded by some as just and by others as unjust, or as good by some and bad by others. . . . Different people believe in different gods; some in providence, others not. In burying their dead, the Egyptians embalm them; the Romans burn them; the Pœonians throw them into lakes. As to what is true, then, let suspension of judgment be our practice.

VI. Based on Intermixtures

The *sixth* mode relates to mixtures and participations, by virtue of which nothing appears pure in and by itself, but only in combination with air, light, moisture, solidity, heat, cold, movement, exhalations and other forces. For purple shows different tints in sunlight, moonlight, and lamplight; and our own complexion does not appear the same at noon and when the sun is low. Again, a rock which in air takes two men to lift is easily moved about in water, either because, being in reality heavy, it is lifted by the water or because, being light, it is made heavy by the air. Of its own inherent property we know nothing, any more than of the constituent oils in an ointment.

VII. Based on Positions and Intervals and Locations

The *seventh* mode has reference to distances, positions, places and the occupants of the places. In this mode things which are thought to be large appear small, square things round; flat things appear to have projections, straight things to be bent, and colorless colored. So the sun, on account of its distance, appears small, mountains when far away appear misty and smooth, but when near at hand rugged. Furthermore, the sun at its rising has a certain appearance, but has a dissimilar appearance when in mid-heaven, and the same body one appearance in a wood and another in open country. The image again varies according to the position of the object, and a dove's neck according to the way it is turned. Since, then, it is not possible to observe these things apart from places and positions, their real nature is unknowable.

VIII. Based on the Quantities and Formations of the Underlying Objects

The *eighth* mode is concerned with quantities and qualities of things, say heat or cold, swiftness or slowness, colorlessness or variety of colors. Thus wine taken in moderation strengthens the body, but too much of it is weakening; and so with food and other things.

IX. Based on the Frequency or Rarity of Occurrence

The *ninth* mode has to do with perpetuity, strangeness, or rarity. Thus earthquakes are no surprise to those among whom they constantly take place; nor is the sun, for it is seen every day.

X. Based on the Fact of Relativity

The *tenth* mode rests on inter-relation, e.g., between light and heavy, strong and weak, greater and less, up and down. Thus that which is on the right is not so by nature, but is so understood in virtue of its position with respect to

something else; for, if that change its position, the thing is no longer on the right. Similarly father and brother are relative terms, day is relative to the sun, and all things relative to our mind. Thus relative terms are in and by themselves unknowable. These, then, are the ten modes of perplexity.¹

IS ABSOLUTE SKEPTICISM A COHERENT POSITION?

Actually, there have been relatively few absolute skeptics. It is not hard to see why. Critics of this position have been quick to charge that it is impractical and impossible. It is *impractical* because, from the purely practical standpoint of getting along in the world, no one in his or her right mind can actually live on such a premise. Our daily lives are pervaded by what we take to be (whether they actually are or not) assurances, certainties, and in a word, all kinds of *knowledge*. Why, for that matter, are you reading this book, studying philosophy, or studying *anything*, if not because you think that something can be learned, understood, *known*? And where, on the skeptical view, is there any place for responsible actions or serious commitments and decisions?

Is absolute skepticism impractical?

More specifically, according to the critics, all absolute skeptics founder sooner or later on the utter *impossibility* of their position. It is impossible for several reasons. First, must not even the staunchest skeptic admit that *some* things at least are certain? For example, that $2 + 2 = 4$, and that whether or not our senses deceive us about the actual world, we are at least certain of the *impressions*? Second, does not the very assertion that we cannot know anything actually necessitate that we do know some things? For example, that we, who claim to know nothing, exist, and that the Law of Non-Contradiction, without which nothing—not even the skeptic's claim—can be asserted at all, is certain?

Is absolute skepticism even possible?

Finally, and still more decisive, is the charge that the absolute skeptics' assertion that they know nothing is strictly self-contradictory or *self-refuting*. For they maintain, *with the greatest assurance*, that we cannot maintain anything. Otherwise stated: If we cannot know anything, then how do we know *that*? You might think of it as a self-destructing proposition. Stated again: If absolute skepticism is *true*, then it must be *false*!

Pyrrho himself anticipated the similar criticism that his position implied its own falsehood. He retorted (as some skeptical-type readers will be tempted to retort) that he was not, in fact, even certain that he was not certain of anything. But, of course, that kind of talk could go on forever:

An infinite regress of ignorance

We cannot know anything.

We cannot know that we cannot know anything.

We cannot know that we cannot know that we cannot know anything.

⋮

¹Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, IX, 74, 79–88, tr. R. D. Hicks (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1925), II. I have supplied the headings from the longer account of Sextus Empiricus.

THE SALE OF A SKEPTIC

In his *Sale of the Philosophers* (about A.D. 175) Lucian pokes fun at some Greek philosophers under the guise of having them put up for sale at an auction. In the following (and concluding) passage,¹ the Skeptic Pyrrho is clearly represented by Pyrrhios ("Coppernob").

ZEUS: Who's left?

HERMES: This Skeptic here. Hey, Coppernob! Come here and be auctioned! Hurry up! Not many to sell you to; most of them are drifting off now. Still—any bids for this one?

BUYER: Yes, me. But tell me first, what do you know?

PYRRHIAS: Nothing.

BUYER: How do you mean, nothing?

PYRRHIAS: I don't think there *is* anything at all.

BUYER: Aren't we something?

PYRRHIAS: I'm not even sure of that.

BUYER: Nor even that you're somebody?

PYRRHIAS: I'm much more doubtful still about that.

BUYER: What a state to be in! Well, what's the idea of these scales?

PYRRHIAS: I weigh arguments in them. I balance them till they're equal, and when I see they're exactly alike and exactly the same weight then—ah, then!—I don't know which is the sounder.

BUYER: What are you good at apart from that?

PYRRHIAS: Everything except catching a runaway slave.

¹Lucian, *Sale of the Philosophers*, in *Selected Works*, tr. Bryan P. Reardon (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), pp. 109–111.

(continued on next page)

Is it not necessary that there be at some point a *basis* for one's claims? We may, of course, argue over what counts as legitimate starting points—some have called them "properly basic beliefs"—but must we not have *some*? Did not Aristotle teach us a long time ago that an infinite regress of claims nullifies all of them?

One of the best-known refutations of skepticism comes from St. Augustine in the medieval period. He directs himself to the "Academicians," a school of skepticism in Augustine's day led by Carneades. Against these skeptics, Augustine argues for the certitude of logical truths, mathematical truths, the reality of the world, and one's own immediate perceptions. Which of these counterattacks can you identify in the following extract from Augustine's *Against the Academicians*?

BUYER: And why can't you do that?

PYRRHIAS: My good man, I can't apprehend anything.²

BUYER: I don't suppose you can. You seem slow and stupid. Well, what's the end of your knowledge?

PYRRHIAS: Ignorance, deafness, and blindness.

BUYER: You'll be unable to see or hear, you say?

PYRRHIAS: And unable to judge or feel either. No better than a worm, in fact.

BUYER: I must buy you for that. How much shall we say for him?

HERMES: One Attic mina.

BUYER: There you are. Well now, you—I've bought you, eh?

PYRRHIAS: I'm not sure.

BUYER: Nonsense! I *have* bought you, and I've paid my money.

PYRRHIAS: I defer judgment; I'm considering the matter.

BUYER: Look, you come with me—you're my slave.

PYRRHIAS: Who can tell whether what you say is true?

BUYER: The auctioneer can. My mina can. These people here can.

PYRRHIAS: Is there anybody here?

BUYER: I'm going to put you on the treadmill, then. I'll show you I'm boss—the hard way!

PYRRHIAS: Suspend decision on it.

BUYER: Oh, ye gods! Look, I've already told you my decision.

HERMES: Stop dillydallying, you, and go with him—he's bought you. Gentlemen, we invite you to come tomorrow; we'll be putting up ordinary people, workmen and tradesmen.

²In Greek this involves a pun on the word *katalambano*, which means both "to seize" and "to understand."

You say that nothing can be apprehended in philosophy and, in order to spread your opinion far and wide, you make use of the disputes and contentions of philosophers and you think that these dissensions furnish arms for you against them. . . . I hold as certain either that there is or is not one world; and if there is not one, there are either a finite or an infinite number of worlds. Carneades would teach that that opinion resembles what is false. I likewise know that this world of ours has been so arranged either because of the nature of bodies or by some providence, and that it either always was and will be or that it began to exist and will by no means cease existing, or that it does not have its origin in time but will have an end, or that it has started to remain in existence and will remain but not forever, and I know innumerable physical phenomena of this type. For those disjunctions are true nor can anyone

THE GREEK SKEPTICS

"The Greek Skeptics are known to us only in fragments of their writings, particularly in references of them by their opponents. Pyrrho, the reputed founder of the school, composed no writings, perhaps esteeming silence the becoming attitude for a Skeptic. Yet Aenesidemus, nearly four hundred years later, wrote 'eight books' in summary of Pyrrho's alleged teachings. Pyrrho is a peg on which Skeptics generally hang their witty sayings, so that the word Pyrrhonism has come to be used almost interchangeably with excessive Skepticism."

Sterling P. Lamprecht, *Our Philosophical Traditions* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955), pp. 92–93.

confuse them with any likeness to what is false. But take something for granted, says the Academician. I do not wish to do so; for that is to say: abandon what you know; say what you do not know. But opinion is uncertain. Assuredly it is better that it be uncertain than that it be destroyed; it surely is clear; it certainly now can be called false or true. I say that I know this opinion. Prove to me that I do not know them, you who do not deny that such matters pertain to philosophy and who maintain that none of these things can be known; say that those disjunctive ideas are either false or have something in common with what is false from which they cannot altogether be distinguished.

SELF-REFUTING PROPOSITIONS

Propositions make claims, of course, about many things. When, however, a proposition is itself one of the things it makes a claim about, it sometimes turns out to be *self-refuting*. This means that if the proposition is taken seriously, then it backfires on itself—if it's true it must be false!

A well-known example of a self-refuting proposition is: "All generalizations are false." If all generalizations are false, then the claim itself, which is a generalization, must be false. Especially puzzling is the proposition

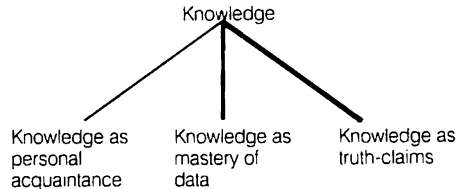
The sentence in this box is false.

If it's false, then it must be true; if it's true, it must be false! Is the claim of the absolute skeptic, "We can be certain of absolutely nothing," another example of a self-refuting proposition?

 "KNOWING" IS NOT A SIMPLE MATTER

When you claim to "know" something is it perfectly clear what you are claiming? Actually, "to know" can mean many different things, and, consequently, there are many different types of knowledge.

Knowing or knowledge falls at least into three broad categories. (1) Knowledge as personal acquaintance, as in the statement "I know Howard" (2) knowledge as mastery of



information or data, as in "I know German"; and (3) knowledge as involved in the claim that something or other is true (truth-claims), as in "I know that in fourteen hundred and ninety-two Columbus sailed the ocean blue."

Epistemology, or the theory of knowledge, is concerned by and large (though not exclusively) with problems posed by knowledge as truth-claims.

Whence, he says, do you know that this world exists if the senses are untrustworthy? Your methods of reasoning have never been able to disprove the power of the senses in such a way as to convince us that nothing is seen and you certainly have never dared to try such a thing, but you have exerted yourself to persuade us urgently that (a thing) can be otherwise than it seems. And so I call this entire thing, whatever it is, which surrounds us and nourishes us, this object, I say, which appears before my eyes and which I perceive is made up of earth and sky, or what appears to be earth and sky, the world. If you say nothing is seen by me, I shall never err. For he is in error who rashly proves what seems to him. For you say that what is false can be seen by those perceiving it; you do not say that nothing is seen. Certainly every reason for arguing will be removed when it pleases you to settle the point, if we not only know nothing but if nothing is even seen by us. If, however, you deny that this object which appears to me is the world, you are making it a controversy in regard to a name since I said that I called it the world. . . .

It now remains for us to inquire whether the senses report the truth when they give information. Suppose that some Epicurean should say: "I have no complaint to make in regard to the senses; for it is unjust to demand more of them than they can give; moreover whatever the eyes can see they see in a reliable manner." Then is what they see in regard to an oar in the water true? It certainly is true. For when the reason is added for its appearing thus, if the

oar dipped in the water seemed straight, I should rather blame my eyes for the false report. For they did not see what should have been seen when such causes arose. What need is there of many illustrations? This can also be said of the movement of towers, of the feathers of birds, of innumerable other things. "And yet I am deceived if I give my assent," someone says. Do not give assent any further than to the extent that you can persuade yourself that it appears true to you, and there is no deception. For I do not see how the Academician can refute him who says: "I know that this appears white to me, I know that my hearing is delighted with this, I know that this has an agreeable odor, I know that this tastes sweet to me, I know that this feels cold to me." Tell us rather whether the leaves of the wild olive trees, which the goat so persistently desires, are by their very nature bitter. O foolish man! Is not the goat more reasonable? I do not know how they seem to the goat, but they are bitter to me. What more do you ask for? But perhaps there is also some one to whom they do not taste bitter. Do you trouble yourself about this? Did I say they were bitter to everyone? I said they were bitter to me and I do not always maintain this. For what if for some reason or other a thing which now tastes sweet to a person should at another time seem bitter to him? I say this that, when a person tastes something, he can honestly swear that he knows it is sweet to his palate or the contrary, and that no trickery of the Greeks can dispossess him of that knowledge. For who would be so bold as to say to me when I am longing for something with great pleasure: Perhaps you do not taste it, but this is only a dream? Do I offer any opposition to him? But still that would give me pleasure even in my sleep. Therefore no likeness to what is false obscures that which I have said I know, and both the Epicurean and the Cyrenaics may say many other things in favor of the senses against which I have heard that the Academicians have not said anything. But why should this concern me? If they so desire and if they can, let them even do away with the argument with my approbation. Whatever argument they raise against the senses has no weight against all philosophers. For there are those who admit that whatever the mind receives through a sense of the body, can beget opinion, but they deny (that it can beget) knowledge which, however, they wish to be confined to the intellect and to live in the mind, far removed from the senses. And perhaps that wise man whom we are seeking is in their number.²

Thus, at least, it has seemed to most philosophers: Whatever we may think of other forms of skepticism, absolute skepticism, or the denial of the very possibility of knowledge itself, must be rejected at the start. If so, the question becomes not *whether* we can know, but *what*, *how*, and *how much* we can know.

²St. Augustine, *Against the Academicians*, III, 23–26, tr. Sister Mary Patricia Garvey (Milwaukee, Wis.: Marquette University Press, 1957).

Very different from the rather standard forms of skepticism mentioned above is the sort—not so bombastic, but very influential these days—which calls into question the very nature of the philosophical enterprise as traditionally practiced. More specifically, this skepticism challenges the presumption of philosophy in conceiving itself to be a sort of umbrella discipline which sets the epistemological rules and agenda for other disciplines. This challenge presses for a much more restrained and modest role for the philosopher. The challenge has been delivered most forcefully by the contemporary philosopher Richard Rorty, aided and abetted by the contributions of other philosophers, such as Alasdair MacIntyre, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jürgen Habermas, and Paul Ricoeur.³

Actually, what we have here is a kind of philosophical version, or expression, of a more general movement called “postmodernism.” This larger movement involves participants not only from philosophy “proper,” but also from philosophy of science, religious studies, intellectual history, literary criticism, social theory, feminist criticism, and the like. What ties them all together in a sort of common cause may be summarized in four points: First is the wholistic manner in which they approach their agenda. Where others see and emphasize distinctions and dichotomies, these thinkers see connections and continuities—between subject and object, between theory and practice, between fact and value, between areas of study, between domains of culture. Second is their pragmatic insistence on the greater importance of the practical over the theoretical. As Marx said, “Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it”; or as Nietzsche said, the ultimate test of a philosophy is whether one can live by it; or, as Dewey said, the measure of the overall value of a philosophy is whether it illuminates our ordinary life experiences and predicaments and makes our dealings with them more fruitful. Third, we have the insistence on the relativity of vocabularies to historical periods and traditions. Otherwise stated, this is the awareness and confession that our perspectives, doctrines, intuitions, sensibilities, vision, paradigms, and explanations are thoroughly conditioned by our *Sitz in Leben*, situation in life, or, more idiomatically, “where we’re coming from.” Finally, fourth is the rejection of the superscientific conception of facts as somehow neutral, uninterpreted, and simply given. Rather, everything in our experience is interpreted and “theory-laden” as soon as we experience it.

But back to Rorty. In spite of his reputation as one who has said farewell to philosophy in general and epistemology in particular, he does indeed

Postmodernism

³In the discussion that follows, I am greatly indebted to an unpublished paper by my colleague Professor Robert Rogers, “Rorty and Friends.”

Rorty's historicism

have a philosophy. Or at least a *metaphilosophy*, that is, a philosophy *about* philosophy. That he is a participant in the movement we have just characterized is evident because his philosophy has been described as, on the negative side, critical and subversive, and on the positive side, pragmatist, wholistic, historicist, nominalist, pluralist, ironist, secular, and liberal. For our present purpose it will be sufficient to focus on two of these: Rorty's *historicism* and *pluralism*.

Historicism insists, as we have already seen, on the necessity of putting fundamental distinctions, values, and starting points within the historical contexts in which they first appear, in order to understand what point or purpose they initially served and to see whether they might illuminate our own thought and life and alternatives. This is, obviously, a contextual approach. One important payoff for Rorty is the rejection of foundationalism, an idea mentioned already in Chapter 1 and exemplified in many places throughout this book. Foundationalism is the traditional attempt to find some ultimate ground or basis for knowledge, choice, action, and criticism which lies outside all that is merely contingent upon human practice, culture, and convention. Examples would include Platonic Forms, Aristotelian essences, God's revealed Word, Cartesian clear and distinct ideas, *a priori* truths, fundamental intuitions, and the like. The truth is, says Rorty, that such attempts to escape history and contingency to find some foundational, immutable point of departure merely raise to the level of the universal and necessary some practice, standard, or metaphor that happens to be dominant or suggestive at a particular time and place. To be historicist, then, is to be skeptical about any possibility of getting beyond the contingent and

Richard Rorty, advocate of philosophy as "edifying discourse."



Courtesy, Richard Rorty, University of Virginia, Charlottesville.

merely human. Traditional Philosophy—with a capital “P”—must be replaced by the much more modest enterprise of philosophy—with a lower-case “p.” The latter, as Rorty says in quoting Wilfred Sellars, is “an attempt to see how things, in the broadest possible sense of the term, hang together, in the broadest possible sense of the term.”

Closely related to Rorty’s historicism is his pluralism. As with his historicism, this is a metaphilosophical thesis. According to pluralism (in Rorty’s sense), there is no neutral ground from which one might judge competing philosophical starting points. At the level of the most ultimate disagreements, there is no refutation of radical skepticism that does not beg the question; nor is there any neutral ground, acceptable to all parties, from which we might resolve the differences between the realist and the pragmatist, or the differences between the liberal and the totalitarian. Each of these competing positions is a genuine option; everything is up for grabs. Nor, of course, will there be any point, according to philosophical pluralists, in maintaining that nonetheless there is some truth here, whether or not one can establish that truth in a neutral way. Such a claim could only be that certain of these positions correctly represent the world, or human nature—the way it really is—whether or not we are able to *show* that it is that way, so what’s the point? Any such appeal to representationalism—the view that the mind is a kind of mirror which captures and reflects what is “really out there”—has no real explanatory force.

So, what’s left to do? Rorty’s answer: Philosophy’s job is to “keep the conversation going” and to “muddle through.” To keep the conversation going is not merely to keep talking, of course, but to keep introducing new idioms, new metaphors, new readings of texts, and so on. In so doing, in practicing what Rorty calls “edifying philosophy,” we attempt to keep philosophy and criticism from settling down into one language accepted as canonical, a fixed common framework for all philosophical inquiry. From Rorty’s pluralistic point of view, it would be just as deplorable for philosophy to settle down within one generally accepted vocabulary, defined and sanctioned by the profession, as it would be—and at times has been—for the art of painting, say, to become confined within the approved canons of some religious—or governmentally—sponsored framework. No, what we have to do is play off certain basic commitments against others, trying to show the overall superiority of our own, but without the ability to appeal to principles and values accepted by all parties to the debate.

Rorty’s best-known book is called *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Its thesis is that the traditional image of the mind as able to reflect and represent accurately the reality “out there” is misguided and must be replaced by an image that does justice, for example, to the points made above. Some of these points are suggested in the following extract from Rorty’s book, though the main point concerns the distinction between mainstream, constructive, “systematic” philosophy, centered in the traditional epistemology, and the peripheral, reactive, “edifying” philosophy which is suspicious of epistemology and exemplifies a very different and less pretentious approach—and a desire for “open space.”

Rorty’s pluralism

Edifying philosophy

On the periphery of the history of modern philosophy, one finds figures who, without forming a "tradition," resemble each other in their distrust of the notion that man's essence is to be a knower of essences. Goethe, Kierkegaard, Santayana, William James, Dewey, the later Wittgenstein, the later Heidegger, are figures of this sort. They are often accused of relativism or cynicism. They are often dubious about progress, and especially about the latest claim that such-and-such a discipline has at last made the nature of human knowledge so clear that reason will now spread throughout the rest of human activity. These writers have kept alive the suggestion that, even when we have justified true belief about everything we want to know, we may have no more than conformity to the norms of the day. They have kept alive the historicist sense that this century's "superstition" was the last century's triumph of reason, as well as the relativist sense that the latest vocabulary, borrowed from the latest scientific achievement, may not express privileged representations of essences, but be just another of the potential infinity of vocabularies in which the world can be described.

The mainstream philosophers are the philosophers I shall call "systematic," and the peripheral ones are those I shall call "edifying." These peripheral, pragmatic philosophers are skeptical primarily *about systematic philosophy*, about the whole project of universal commensuration. In our time, Dewey, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger are the great edifying, peripheral, thinkers. All three make it as difficult as possible to take their thought as expressing views on traditional philosophical problems, or as making constructive proposals for philosophy as a cooperative and progressive discipline. They make fun of the classic picture of man, the picture which contains systematic philosophy, the search for universal commensuration in a final vocabulary. They hammer away at the holistic point that words take their meanings from other words rather than by virtue of their representative character, and the corollary that vocabularies acquire their privileges from the men who use them rather than from their transparency to the real.

. . . Great systematic philosophers are constructive and offer arguments. Great edifying philosophers are reactive and offer satires, parodies, aphorisms. They know their work loses its point when the period they were reacting against is over. They are *intentionally* peripheral. Great systematic philosophers, like great scientists, build for eternity. Great edifying philosophers destroy for the sake of their own generation. Systematic philosophers want to put their subject on the secure path of a science. Edifying philosophers want to keep space open for the sense of wonder which poets can sometimes cause—wonder that there is something new under the sun, something which is *not* an accurate representation of what was already there, something which (at least for the moment) cannot be explained and can barely be described.⁴

Rorty's "deconstruction" of philosophy has been criticized in various ways. We mention here three. First, there are many philosophers who share

⁴Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 367–370.

Rorty's historicist and antifoundationalist bent but who don't think that the consequences are all that great: the end of foundationalism would hardly mean the end of philosophic problems. Take, for example, the traditional problem of free will and determinism. The historicist-antifoundationalist might say that this problem can be formulated only within certain conceptual schemes, such as the modern period, when the concepts of causality and universal determinism became available, or in the Christian context, with its idea of divine foreknowledge. Likewise, according to this view, it is possible that at some point in the future the problem will no longer be demanding or even intelligible. But surely it does not follow from any of this that the problem is not a forceful and demanding one—an important and *real* one—for us, at our point in history, confronted as we are with the interpretation of *our* world and *our* experience, which is necessarily different from that of another age and culture.

The second criticism involves Rorty's rejection of necessary truths, or non-negotiable, non-arguable, universally binding affirmations. Historicism and antifoundationalism may not themselves necessarily lead to a denial of the existence of necessary truths. What they insist on is a plurality of possible starting points for philosophy, a plurality of basic language games or conceptual schemes. Insofar as his historicism and antifoundationalism are concerned, Rorty might have freely granted a whole host of truths that are necessary truths. His particular version of pragmatism, for example, insists on a rather thoroughgoing wholism, within which there seems to be little place for necessary truths. Ironically, however, many of the points that Rorty himself insists on have at least the appearance of being, if true, then necessarily true.

Consider, for example, his claims that there is no neutral ground from which one might decide the issues between pragmatism and realism; that "there is no epistemological difference between truth about what ought to be and truth about what is"; that there is no single, right way to speak about nature; that we need to give up the idea that "intellectual or political progress is rational, in any sense of rational which is neutral between vocabularies"; and that "there is no noncircular theoretical backup for the belief that cruelty is horrible." Whether or not one agrees with these positions, one has to agree that they at least appear to be necessarily true, if true at all. Rorty's wholism, however, doesn't seem able to provide for such necessary truths. Furthermore, contrary to the character of his whole critique, not only does his philosophy contain a great many such statements, so central to his whole outlook, but many of them are clearly epistemological in nature. Nor are they all merely negative in form, as in his claim that new metaphors extend the realm of possibilities. In spite of Rorty's best efforts, then, the critic concludes that epistemology, of some sort, and maybe even a traditional sort, appears to be an important part of Rorty's own philosophy.

Third, it is understandable that Rorty has been perceived and represented by many as a relativist. We have seen already that skepticism is fed by the relativity of reason, sense perception, and custom. In the case of Rorty and friends, however, the conclusion seems to be not only that we can have no

Is the attack on foundationalism relevant?

Does Rorty himself invoke necessary truths?

Is Rorty really a relativist?

POSTMODERNISM: "STAR TREK, THE NEXT GENERATION"

Modernity has been under attack since Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) lobbed the first volley in the late nineteenth century. But the full-scale frontal assault did not begin until the 1970s. The immediate impulse for the dismantling of the Enlightenment project came from the rise of deconstruction as a literary theory, which influenced a new movement in philosophy.

Deconstruction arose in response to a theory in literature called "structuralism." Structuralists theorized that cultures develop literary documents—texts—in an attempt to provide structures of meaning by which people can make sense out of the meaninglessness of their experience. Literature, therefore, provides categories with which we can organize and understand our experience of reality. Further, all societies and cultures possess a common, invariant structure.

The deconstructionists (or poststructuralists) rejected the tenets of structuralism. Meaning is not inherent in a text itself, they argued, but emerges only as the interpreter enters into dialogue with the text. Consequently, the meaning of a text depends on the perspective of the one who enters into dialogue with it, so there are as many interpretations of a text as readers (or readings).

Postmodern philosophers applied the theories of the literary deconstructionists to the world as a whole. Just as the meaning of a text depends on the reader, so also reality can be "read" differently depending on the perspectives of the knowing selves that encounter it. This means that there is no one meaning of the world, no transcendent center to reality as a whole.

On the basis of ideas such as these, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida called for the destruction of "onto-theology" (the attempt to set forth ontological descriptions of reality) as well as the "metaphysics of presence" (the idea that a transcendent something is present in reality). Because nothing transcendent inheres in reality, all that emerges in the knowing process is the perspective of the self who interprets reality.

Michel Foucault added a moral twist to Derrida's call. Every interpretation is put forward by those in power, he theorized. Because "knowledge" is always the result of the use of power, to name something is to exercise power and hence to do violence to what is named. Social institutions do violence by imposing their own understanding on the centerless flux of experience. Thus, in contrast to Bacon, who sought knowledge in order to gain power over nature, Foucault claimed that every assertion of knowledge is an act of power.

Richard Rorty, in turn, jettisoned the classic conception of truth as either the mind or language mirroring nature. Truth is established neither by the correspondence of an assertion with objective reality nor by the internal coherence of the assertions themselves. Rorty argued that we should simply disband the search for truth and be content with interpretation. Hence, he proposed to replace classic "systematic philosophy" with "edifying philosophy," which "aims at continuing a conversation rather than at discovering truth."

The work of Derrida, Foucault, and Rorty reflects what seems to have become the central dictum of postmodern philosophy: "All is difference." This view sweeps

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away the “uni” of the “universe” sought by the Enlightenment project, the quest for a unified grasp of objective reality. The world has no center, only differing viewpoints and perspectives. In fact, even the concept of “world” presupposes an objective unity or a coherent whole that does not exist “out there.” In the end, the postmodern world is merely an arena of dueling texts.

Although philosophers such as Derrida, Foucault, and Rorty have been influential on university campuses, they are only a part of a larger shift in thinking reflected in Western culture. What unifies the otherwise diverse strands of postmodernism is the questioning of the central assumptions of Enlightenment epistemology.

In the postmodern world, people are no longer convinced that knowledge is inherently good. In eschewing the Enlightenment myth of inevitable progress, postmodernism replaces the optimism of the last century with a gnawing pessimism. It is simply not the case that “each and every day in each and every way we are getting better and better.” For the first time in many years, members of the emerging generation do not share the conviction of their parents that we will solve the enormous problems of the planet or that their economic situation will surpass that of their parents. They know that life on the earth is fragile, and the continued existence of humankind is dependent on a new attitude which replaces the image of conquest with cooperation.

The new emphasis on wholism is related to the postmodern rejection of the second Enlightenment assumption, namely, that truth is certain and hence purely rational. The postmodern mind refuses to limit truth to its rational dimension and thus dethrones the human intellect as the arbiter of truth. Because truth is non-rational, there are other ways of knowing, including through the emotions and the intuition.

Finally, the postmodern mind no longer accepts the Enlightenment belief that knowledge is objective. Knowledge cannot be merely objective, because the postmodern model of the world does not see the universe as mechanistic and dualistic, but historical, relational, and personal. The world is not simply an objective given that is “out there,” waiting to be discovered and known. Instead it is relative, indeterminate, and participatory.

In rejecting the modern assumption of the objectivity of knowledge, the postmodern mind likewise dismisses the Enlightenment ideal of the dispassionate, autonomous knower. Knowledge is not eternal and culturally neutral. Nor is it waiting to be discovered by scientists who bring their rational talents to the givenness of the world. Rather, knowledge is historically and culturally implicated, and consequently, our knowledge is always incomplete.

The postmodern world view operates with a community-based understanding of truth. Not only the specific truths we accept, but even our understanding of truth, are a function of the community in which we participate. This basis in community, in turn, leads to a new conception of the relativity of truth. Not only is there no absolute truth; more significantly, truth is relative to the community in which we participate. With this in view, the postmodern thinker has given up the Enlightenment quest for the one, universal, supracultural, timeless truth. In its place, truth is what fits within a specific community; truth consists in the ground rules that facilitate the well-being of the community in which one participates.

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The postmodern perspective is reflected in the second "Star Trek" series, "The Next Generation." The humans who make up the original Enterprise are now joined by humanoid life forms from other parts of the universe. This change represents the broader universality of postmodernity: humans are no longer the only advanced beings operative throughout the cosmos. More importantly, the understanding of the quest for knowledge has changed. Humankind is not capable of completing the mandate alone; nor does the burden of the quest fall to humans alone. Hence, the crew of the Enterprise symbolizes the "new ecology" of humankind in partnership with the universe. Their mission is no longer "to boldly go where no man has gone before," but "where no *one* has gone before."

In "The Next Generation," Data replaces Spock. In a sense, Data is Spock, the fully rational thinker capable of superhuman intellectual feats. Despite his seemingly perfect intellect, rather than being the transcendent human ideal Spock embodies, he is an android—a subhuman machine. His desire is not only to understand what it means to be human, but also to become human. However, he lacks certain necessary aspects of humanness, including a sense of humor, emotion, and the ability to dream (at least until he learns that his maker programmed dreaming into his circuitry).

Although Data often provides valuable assistance in dealing with problems, he is only one of several who contribute to finding solutions. In addition to the master of rationality, the Enterprise crew includes persons skilled in the affective and intuitive dimensions of human life. Especially prominent is Counselor Troi, a woman gifted with the ability to perceive the hidden feelings of others.

The new voyages of the Enterprise lead its varied crew into a postmodern universe. In this new world, time is no longer simply linear, appearance is not necessarily reality, and the rational is not always to be trusted. In contrast to the older series, which in typical modern fashion generally ignores questions of God and religious belief, the postmodern world of "The Next Generation" also includes the supernatural, embodied in the strange character "Q." Yet its picture of the divine is not simply that of traditional Christian theology. Although possessing the classical attributes of divine power (such as omniscience), the godlike being "Q" is morally ambiguous, displaying both benevolence and a bent toward cynicism and self-gratification.¹

¹Stanley J. Grenz, "Star Trek and the Next Generation: Postmodernism and the Future of Evangelical Theology," *CRUX*, 30 (March 1994), pp. 24–32.

absolute knowledge of anything but, at the same time, that we can have absolute knowledge of everything—all propositions must be *true*. As Alvin Plantinga says, this follows from Rorty's well-known definition, "truth is what my peers will let me get away with saying."

One widely popular version of relativism is Richard Rorty's notion that truth is what my peers will let me get away with saying. On this view what is true for me, naturally enough, might be false for you; *my* peers might let *me* get away with saying something that *your* peers won't let *you* get away with saying: for

of course we may have different peers. (And even if we had the *same* peers, there is no reason why they would be obliged to let you and me get away with saying the same things.) Although this view is very much *au courant* and with-it in the contemporary intellectual world, it has consequences that are peculiar, not to say preposterous. For example, most of us think that the Chinese authorities did something monstrous in murdering those hundreds of young people in Tiananmen Square, and then compounded their wickedness by denying that they had done it. On Rorty's view, however, this is an uncharitable misunderstanding. What the authorities were really doing, in denying that they had murdered those students, was something wholly praiseworthy: they were trying to bring it about that the alleged massacre never happened. For they were trying to see to it that their peers would let them get away with saying that the massacre never happened; that is, they were trying to make it *true* that it never happened; and who can fault them for that? The same goes for those contemporary neo-Nazis who claim that there was no holocaust; from a Rortian view, they are only trying to see to it that such a terrible thing never happened; and what could be more commendable than that? This way of thinking has real possibilities for dealing with poverty and disease: if only we let each other get away with saying that there isn't any poverty and disease—no cancer or AIDS, let's say—then it would be true that there isn't any; and if it were true that there isn't any, then of course there wouldn't be any. That seems vastly cheaper and less cumbersome than the conventional methods of fighting poverty and disease. At a more personal level, if you have done something wrong, it is not too late: lie about it, thus bringing it about that your peers will let you get away with saying that you didn't do it, then it will be true both that you didn't do it, and, as an added bonus, that you didn't even lie about it.⁵

CHAPTER 8 IN REVIEW

SUMMARY

Skepticism means a doubting or incredulous state of mind. It comes in many levels of intensity, and all of us are skeptical about something or other at one time or another. A dash of skepticism is surely healthy inasmuch as it serves as an antidote to gullibility. As with gullibility, however, overdoses of skepticism can be detrimental to one's philosophical health.

It is useful to distinguish between commonsense skepticism, philosophical skepticism, and absolute skepticism. The latter, which denies that we can know anything whatsoever, was exemplified in the ancient Pyrrho and his school. The arguments for skepticism are usually based on the relativity (or differences of opinion) in reason, sense perception, and custom. Amidst such disagreements, what can one do but suspend judgment and abandon all hope of knowledge?

⁵ Alvin Plantinga, "The Twin Pillars of Christian Scholarship," in *The Stob Lectures of Calvin College and Seminary, 1989–1990*.

Not so fast, say those who charge that, at least, absolute skepticism is both impractical and impossible. It is impractical, they say, because no one can live a coherent life except on the assumption that some things can be *known*. It is impossible not only because we surely have certainty about such things as our own existence and impressions, but also because the absolute skeptics affirm with *complete conviction* their thesis that *nothing can be known* and are therefore hopelessly self-contradictory. Similar reasoning is employed by St. Augustine, whose attack on skepticism is perhaps one of the best known.

Richard Rorty represents the mood of postmodernism, and along with that, a broader kind of skepticism. Here, the traditional image of the mind as a reflector of reality is challenged in favor of the more modest image of the mind as always struggling toward the truth, employing whatever suggestive tools it possesses, and conditioned by the culture of a particular time and place. In such a view, philosophy should both divest itself of grandiose illusions about its role among the disciplines and settle for a kind of “knowledge” that is much less knowledge in the traditional sense and much more in the nature of an ongoing conversation.

BASIC IDEAS

- The meaning of “skepticism”
- Three kinds of skepticism
 - Commonsense skepticism
 - Philosophical skepticism
 - Absolute skepticism
- Pyrrho as an example of absolute skepticism
- Historical sources of Pyrrhonic skepticism
- The main argument for skepticism
- Pyrrho’s *Ten Modes*
- Arguments against absolute skepticism
 - Absolute skepticism as impractical
 - Absolute skepticism as impossible
- Self-refuting propositions
- Augustine’s refutations of skepticism
- General features of postmodernism
- Rorty’s historicism
- Rorty’s pluralism
- “Edifying philosophy”
- Three criticisms of Rorty

TEST YOURSELF

1. Why is a certain amount of ordinary skepticism a healthy sign?
2. The main argument for skepticism rests upon *relativity*. What does this mean? Give some examples from the *Ten Modes*.

3. Which of the following does not fit into Rorty's view: (a) wholism, (b) non-negotiable, certain truths, (c) metaphilosophical ideas, or (d) historical relativity of truth?
4. True or false: Aristotle was a skeptic.
5. One philosopher who argued, against the Skeptics, that it is certain that the world either exists or does not exist was _____.
6. Why do some claim that absolute skepticism is self-refuting?
7. True or false: By "pluralism," Rorty means that there is no neutral ground on which we may evaluate various views.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- St. Augustine has been quoted here as a great opponent of skepticism. In another work, entitled *On the Advantages of Believing*, he argues that no practical or intellectual progress can be expected from one who is unwilling ever to accept certain claims on the authority of others. What do you think of this position? What might be said for it and against it?
- How do *you* come out on the question of skepticism? If you are persuaded by the arguments *against* skepticism, then what is the relevance, for epistemology, of the relativity of reason, perception, and custom? (You might recall the discussion at the end of Chapter 1 on living and dead options.)

FOR FURTHER READING

- Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes. *The Modes of Scepticism: Ancient Texts and Modern Interpretations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985. An "introduction to sceptical philosophy" by means of a historical survey of the Greek skeptics and chapters on each of the Ten Modes.
- D. M. Armstrong. *Belief, Truth, and Knowledge*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973. Ch. 11. A somewhat advanced discussion of "The Infinite Regress of Reasons," emphasizing the several possible responses to the problem.
- A. J. Ayer. *The Problem of Knowledge*. London: Macmillan, 1958. Ch. 2. An instructive and readable account of "Skepticism and Certainty," concerned primarily with "philosophical skepticism," by the best-known logical positivist.
- Frederick Copleston. *A History of Philosophy*. Baltimore: Newman Press, 1946-1974. II, Ch. 4. A brief but authoritative account of St. Augustine's theory of knowledge, including his attack against skepticism.
- A. C. Ewing. *The Fundamental Questions of Philosophy*. New York: Collier Books, 1962. Ch. 1. An introductory chapter on the nature of philosophy, containing a short section on "Scepticism" which argues simply and forcefully against radical skepticism.
- N. L. Gifford. *When in Rome: An Introduction to Relativism and Knowledge*. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1983. A popular-level examination and refutation of epistemological relativism.

- Alan R. Malachowski (ed.). *Reading Rorty: Critical Responses to 'Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature' (and Beyond)*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990.
- Arne Naess. *Scepticism*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968. Discussion of all aspects of skepticism, including a sympathetic chapter on specifically Pyrrhonic skepticism.
- Michail A. Slote. *Reason and Scepticism*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1970. A refutation of specifically epistemological skepticism.
- Peter Unger. *Ignorance: A Case for Scepticism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975. A contemporary and sustained defense of a general form of skepticism, concluding with a chapter on "The Impossibility of Truth."
- Michael Williams. *Groundless Belief: An Essay on the Possibility of Epistemology*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977. Chs. 1 and 3. Considers "radical skepticism" and the problem of an infinite regress of justification in relation to contemporary epistemological issues.
- *In addition, see the relevant articles ("Skepticism," "Sociology of Knowledge," etc.) in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards. New York: Macmillan, 1967.