

**HOW
SKEPTICISM
CAN BE
IRRATIONAL**

WHAT IS SKEPTICISM?

Skeptics generally make two (related) claims:

- KNOWLEDGE claim: *we can know nothing or almost nothing.*
- BELIEF claim: *we should withhold belief on everything or almost everything.*

(Why “almost”? Commonly, philosophical skeptics deny that we can know/believe things about the *external world*—but we can still know/believe things like “I am in pain” or “I perceive something red.”)

A (VERY) BRIEF HISTORY OF SKEPTICISM

Pyrrhonian skepticism

- Withhold belief on all matters, including the scope of our knowledge; leads to inner peace.

Descartes

- Dreaming argument, evil genius, Cogito.

Hume

- Skepticism about induction, laws of nature/causation, miracles.

RESPONSES TO SKEPTICISM

Locke: why are you all so preoccupied with certainty? Instead of trying to be certain about everything, we should **proportion our beliefs to the evidence!**

William James: we have **two epistemic goals.**

- Believe Truth
- Avoid Error

Skeptics are **obsessed with avoiding error.** This is a good way to meet the second epistemic goal, but completely ignores the first. **True beliefs are valuable!**



Capturing Christianity 1 week ago

Which of the following do you find more valuable?





5.3K votes

Avoiding false beliefs 9%

Obtaining true beliefs 35%

Both are equally valuable 52%

Unsure 4%

 300    196

 300    196

WAIT, SO WHAT DOES ANY OF THIS HAVE TO DO WITH RELIGION??

In certain (non-philosophical) contexts (e.g. YouTube), when people call themselves **skeptics**, they aren't using the term the way philosophers normally do.

- Global skepticism
- Local skepticism

They are local skeptics in the domain of **religion**. This is very different than philosophical skepticism! Local skepticism can be irrational, as it is ad hoc without special justification.

TWO QUESTIONS FOR RELIGIOUS SKEPTICS:

1. Why are you treating religion differently than other domains?
 - a. **I like science!** Problem: you'd have to be skeptical of a lot more than religion!
 - b. **Bc they involve miracles.** Problems: One, not all religious claims involve miracles. Two, even if we need more evidence to justify belief in a miracle claim, we should still follow the evidence where it leads.
2. Do you care about getting true beliefs, in addition to avoiding false ones?
 - a. If so, maybe it's worth **taking a risk** and believing something. Risks are fun! Don't be so risk averse!

FURTHER RESOURCES

My entry in the T&T Clark Encyclopedia of Christian Theology, “[Epistemology](#)” (short survey of history of epistemology)

My paper, “[The Nature and Rationality of Faith](#)” (for why religious claims aren’t epistemically different)

I have a YouTube video that provides an [introduction to skepticism](#):
<https://youtu.be/url7dMMhOuA>

Pasnau’s Book on the history of epistemology, [After Certainty](#) (2017)