How Do You Know You're Not Wrong? A Response to Skepticism
Paul Copan

Introduction

The triune God of Scripture is the author of truth—the Father's "word is truth"; Jesus is "the truth" who faithfully reveals God's character; and "the Spirit of truth" has come as "another Helper" in Jesus' stead. There's nothing inauthentic or faithless about God. Jesus, "the truth," has come to "set you free" (Jn. 8:32). Satan, the "father of lies" (Jn. 8:44), seeks to distort our perceptions of what is authentic, life-imparting, and freeing. Unlike flawed humans, God is trustworthy: "let God be found true, though every man be found a liar" (Rom. 3:4).

A soul-destroying mindset is gradually overtaking the West. With pseudo-tolerant airs, people apathetically declare, "Whatever!" or, "That's true for you but not for me," or, "That's just your perspective." Another equally soul-destroying perspective is the skepticism that asks, "How do you know you're not wrong?" Such a perspective appears uncommitted to any perspective and attempts to put all others on the defensive. The skeptic's apparent expectation is that all others show with 100% certainty that their view is correct; otherwise, the skeptic will appear victorious by "showing" that it is logically possible that we are wrong and that therefore we can't have confident knowledge in our beliefs.

Professing Christians, influenced by the spirit of the age, have become timid about truth. One Christian professor writes that he has an almost physical reaction to the word *truth*—an unfortunate response to (perhaps) arrogant, Bible-thumping "truth" tellers. Christians should view themselves as mere beggars, graciously and humbly telling other beggars where to find bread. That said, some Christians, even the most scholarly, seem so reluctant to talk about truth

and knowledge—rather *unlike* the earliest Christians who lovingly proclaimed the truth of the good news with conviction and boldness. Today's timidity isn't the stuff of persecuted saints and martyrs.

We live in an era of postmodernism, which is characterized by a suspicion toward metanarratives (large, explanatory systems or worldviews that claim to be universally and objectively true). Besides a pervasive relativism that often accompanies this perspective ("truth" is merely contextual or cultural or perspectival), the equally-corrosive skepticism appears to leave us despairing of finding truth at all.

In this brief essay, I want to address the topic of skepticism, offering a Christian response to it. I have written on this topic elsewhere;[1] so I can only offer summary remarks here.

Responding to Skepticism

 "The truth may exist, but can we know it?" the skeptic asks. Taoism's purported founder, Lao-Tzu, asked, "If, when I was asleep I was a man dreaming I was a butterfly, how do I know when I am awake, I am not a butterfly dreaming that I am a man?" Or maybe we're just brains in a vat receiving signals through electrode hook-up so that our eating steak or winning the World Series is "virtual reality," not actually real? How can we be sure that we're not in a Matrix-like world? Can we truly trust our senses or our reasoning abilities—or are we being duped by some powerful evil genius? The skeptic has a heyday with these kinds of questions and scenarios.

Now skepticism can be *healthy* and *constructive*. After all, we shouldn't be gullible and naïve, believing everything we hear or read. Scripture takes a commonsense view here—a "critical realism": a world exists *independently* of human minds (*realism*), but *sifting, judging,*

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[1] For further discussion of skepticism, see the relevant chapters in Paul Copan, *"How Do You Know You're Not Wrong?"* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005); chapter 7 in Paul Copan, *Loving Wisdom* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2007).

and *discerning* (*critical*) are often required in the knowledge process. This sifting enables us to discern between *appearances* (mirages, optical illusions, dreams) and the way things *are,* between *truth* and *falsehood*. Then there's an *unhealthy* and *corrosive* skepticism. "Global" (total) skeptics completely reject (the possibility of) knowledge. "Local" skeptics may doubt we can have knowledge about *certain aspects* of reality (e.g., God/religion, ethics) but it turns out that global skepticism is impossible and incoherent. How so?

First, the statement *"We can't know"* is one of genuine knowledge: "I know that we can't know." Ironically, such skeptics aren't truly skeptical about two fundamental things they take for granted: (a) the *inescapable logical laws* that they're constantly using to disprove the claims of those who say they have knowledge or (b) that *their minds are properly functioning* so that they can draw their skeptical conclusions! The skeptic will point out that people regularly get things wrong and fall prey to error and deception. However, this argument *already assumes knowledge* of the truth to be able to detect mistakes and deception.

Second, the skeptic often wrongly assumes that if another alternative is even *logically* possible, then you should question your beliefs, no matter how well-grounded. But this just doesn't logically follow at all! How is it that case that if it's *possible* I'm wrong, therefore I *am* wrong? What's more, lots of things are *logically* possible but highly unlikely—swimming across the Atlantic or jumping to the moon.

Third, being less than 100% certain doesn't mean we can't truly know. We can have highly plausible or probable knowledge, even if it's not 100% certain. We can know *confidently* and *truly,* even if not *absolutely* or *exhaustively*. The problem with global skeptics is they have set the standard for knowledge way too high, which ironically leads to the very skepticism they are engaging in! There is no compelling reason to embrace the skeptic's dubious assumptions.

Why should we reject many things we really do know, even if they are less than 100% certain? Instead of accepting the skeptic's assumption, we can ask: "Can you know *with 100% certainty* that *100% certainty* is required to know something?" The honest answer is *no*—and that's okay. There are *degrees* of knowledge; we can know not only what's certain, but what's probable, beyond reasonable doubt, evident, or obvious. The skeptic incorrectly suggests that if we can't know with 100% certainty, then the only alternative is skepticism. But if that's the case, then we can't distinguish between *plausible* and *ridiculous* views, but that position is clearly silly. And certain beliefs may require *further investigation* before they can be truly called knowledge, but that doesn't mean we reject whatever doesn't immediately have strong warrant.

Fourth, in everyday matters, we're right to follow the "credulity principle"—all things being equal, our senses or reasoning abilities are innocent until proven guilty. We typically follow this "commonsense realism"; there's no reason to reject what seems so obvious to us in favor of less-obvious alternatives. Of course, our proneness to sin and self-deception—of which extreme skepticism is a symptom—tends to emerge with issues that *deeply involve us as persons*—belief in God or in right and wrong. Like relativism, skepticism tends to eliminate personal or moral responsibility since it systematically ignores or evades *truth*, which is a crucial component of knowledge. If nothing will persuade the global skeptic anyway, perhaps his position is less rational and more personal. Skepticism can be an easy way out of making commitments, being morally responsible, and pursuing God.

Motives, of course, don't prove or disprove a position, but we should consider personal stumbling blocks that may be driving the skeptical enterprise—issues that only grace and humility can help dislodge. Philosopher Dallas Willard notes that a comprehensive skepticism is

an affliction of the mind for which treatment is appropriate, but skepticism itself can't be advanced as a *rational* ground for anything.[2]

Concluding Remarks

We must never forget that commitment to truth involves virtue or character. While *skepticism, cynicism,* and *suspicion* may define postmodernism or may characterize a Godless perspective, *trust* and *charity* should be the Christian's stance. We're persons made in a relational God's image; therefore, *trust* in a faithful heavenly Father and the cultivation of trusting, committed relationships in our individualistic, self-sufficient age are utterly fitting. And unlike the postmodern approach, *charity* is another virtue we must cultivate—namely, giving the benefit of the doubt and a listening ear. Faith(fulness) and love are profoundly bound up with a commitment to truth.

Jesus' self-declaration as "the truth" (Jn. 14:6) is an affirmation that he is the genuine, trustworthy revealer of God's own character, the measure by whom all truth-claims are judged, and the test for the self-proclaimed seeker: "For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice" (Jn. 18:37). Scripture views truth holistically—personally, intellectually, practically, relationally, and transformationally—not as detached, theoretical, and abstract. Being a person of truth requires more than holding correct beliefs.

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[2] Dallas Willard, "Toward a Phenomenology for the Correspondence Theory of Truth," *Discipline filosofiche* 1 (1991): 125–47. Found online at www.dallaswillard.com.