

Abstract for 'Philosophical Skepticism in the Real World'

Philosophical skepticism is one of the most significant and enduring ideas in the history of western philosophy. A common view about skepticism espoused by David Hume, C.S. Peirce, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and many other philosophers is that it is an esoteric theoretical invention with little relevance to practical matters. Recent work reveals that this idea may be mistaken. Through survey experiments, corpus research and the study of conspiracy theories, this project investigates the real-world impact of philosophical skepticism as it spontaneously arises in society at large.

Project Description

Skepticism is one of the most significant and enduring ideas in the history of western philosophy. The thesis takes many forms. At one extreme is Cartesian skepticism which says we can't know anything about the external world. But there are milder forms which limit the claim of ignorance to specific domains (ethics, religion, the future etc.). Philosophers have long grappled with skepticism, from the Pyrrhonians in ancient Greece, to Kant, Hume, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein and contemporary thinkers like Keith DeRose (2017) and David Chalmers (2022).

A common view about skepticism is that it is an artificial philosophical invention. David Hume (1904) argued that skeptical ruminations must end when we leave the comfort of our philosophical study and 'nature' takes over. And Charles Sanders Peirce (1932) remarked that Cartesian skepticism is 'paper', 'fictitious' and 'illusory'. According to these perspectives, when we are engaged in 'real world' tasks, we will find ourselves being 'certain' and 'knowing' various propositions. Skeptical attitudes are forgotten. They only arise in the artificial confines of the philosophical armchair.

Recent literature on the topic, however, challenges this common view. First, consider the popularity of movies like *The Matrix* and *Inception*. These films have mass appeal in part because they trade on the idea that we may not really know that we are not dreaming or that we are not inside some deep computer simulation. In other words, they rely on the mass appeal of philosophical skepticism (Chalmers 2022).

Other researchers have put forward the idea that some endorsements of conspiracy theories work structurally like classic skeptical cases from the philosophical literature (Pinillos 2019a, Worsnip 2021). Just as Descartes (1993) considered that we might be deceived by an evil demon, conspiracy theorists posit that we might be deceived by a cadre of conspirators who trick us about certain subject matter. Finally, psychologists and philosophers have discovered that something like philosophical skepticism can easily be triggered in humans across different cultures (Waterman et al. 2018, Nagel et al. 2013, Pinillos 2019b). These three

considerations suggest philosophical skepticism may be felt by people in ordinary circumstances. That is, philosophical skepticism exists in the ‘real world’.

I am applying for an IHR seed grant because I would like to further investigate the thesis that philosophical skepticism is felt in the real world. I have already made great headway on this question---my book on the topic, *Why We Doubt: A Cognitive Account of Our Skeptical Inclinations*, is set to be published with Oxford University Press this summer. I have also published several papers which develop a theoretical account of skepticism, with some applications. But the time has come to see the real-world applications of the theory. This research has the potential to have great impact. And hence there’s a great chance it could win a large grant. For example, if it is discovered that the thesis is correct, it may help us explain the persistence of conspiratorial thinking in society—which is a pressing social problem (Worsnip 2021). In addition, the discovery would be further evidence of the relevance of humanities research, including philosophy, to real world problems. A short piece summarizing some of the main theoretical ideas behind this grant proposal can be found in this New York Times piece I wrote in 2018: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/26/opinion/skepticism-philosophy-climate-change.html>

The first part of the project will involve a public conference held at ASU in January of 2024 to discuss real-world implications of philosophical skepticism. I would hope to bring in a world leader in this topic, Jennifer Nagel, from the University of Toronto. Professor Nagel has made a career of uncovering the cognitive and “human” aspects of our epistemic intuitions including reactions to skeptical cases. If she is not available, there are a number of other possible candidates, such as Alex Worsnip (UNC) or John Turri (Western Ontario). I envision a public call-for-papers which would give us a chance to discover new perspectives that fall outside the mainstream literature on the topic.

The second element of the project would consist of three parts: (a) I will conduct survey/experiments to measure the extent to which ordinary agents feel the attraction to philosophical skepticism in ordinary circumstances. (b) I will use corpus search methodology (digital humanities) to measure references to philosophical skepticism in social media and other modalities. And (c), I will look carefully at narratives and studies on conspiratorial thought to determine the commonalities with philosophical skepticism.

Methodology.

The research component will involve three different types of methodology. The first involves survey experiments. These survey experiments are standard in social psychology and experimental philosophy. Subjects recruited from Amazon Turk will be selected from the general population. I will present them with scenarios or short stories where possibilities of error are made salient. I will detect the extent to which these subjects are prone to skepticism. One way of measuring that is by detecting their level of agreement with the claim that they ‘don’t know’. Another type of study looks at personality traits, like openness to experience, and test the extent to which scoring high on this trait predicts proclivity towards skeptical judgments. I have experience using these methods but will consult with others (see ASU Resources Statement).

The second methodology deployed is corpus research which is a core approach in digital humanities. Here, I will investigate the extent to which philosophical skepticism appears in social media and other texts such as blogs and social media sites. I have some experience deploying this method but will consult with others (see ASU Resources Statement).

Finally, I will investigate sociological and psychological accounts of conspiracy theories, and I will try to determine the extent to which there are similarities between philosophical skepticism and conspiratorial thought. I have already begun this kind of work. A chapter in my forthcoming book (*Why We Doubt: A Cognitive Account of Our Skeptical Inclinations*. Oxford University Press) is on this topic. In addition, I will consult with ASU faculty members (see ASU Resources Statement).

I will hire a graduate student to help with research.

Impact Statement

I will host a conference at ASU in the fall of 2023 on the real-world implications of philosophical skepticism. The conference will be open to the ASU community. It will feature a keynote speaker such as Jennifer Nagel (University of Toronto). In addition, it will feature an open call for papers. The hope is that the open call for papers will give a platform to fresh voices.

I expect three sets of academic publications plus articles geared towards the general public. The three types of academic publications correspond to the three types of research discussed above. First, since the mid 2000's, leading analytic philosophy journals including *Nous*, *Mind* and *Philosophical Studies*, *Synthese* have been regularly publishing experimental survey papers consistent with the rapid rise of experimental philosophy (a sub-field of philosophy which incorporates methods from psychology). I have myself published survey experiments in similar journals. In addition, the topic area of research is Epistemology, which is one of the most active areas of study in analytic philosophy.

The second type of research involves corpus research. Many leading journals have also published work deploying this method. Examples include *Mind and Language* and *Ergo*. I have published corpus research myself in *Mind and Language* (Nichols and Pinillos 2018). I will try to publish in these journals. Finally, the study on conspiracy theories can be submitted to one of the top journals in the field as they have become more open to publishing content with real world applications. But at any rate, one of the top journals, *Journal of Philosophy*, published a classic on the philosophy of conspiracy theories: 'Of Conspiracy Theories' (by Bryan Keeley).

I also plan to publish pieces targeted to the public. I've already placed a piece on the connection between philosophical skepticism and climate change denials in the *New York Times* back in 2018. This piece was in the most emailed articles list in the NYT for two days ago and was reprinted in *Question Everything*. Because of the success of this piece, I have a

connection with some of the editors in the NYT including Peter Catapano. My plan is to publish a piece either in the NYT or a magazine like The Atlantic, The New Yorker, or a more specialized venue (designed for members of the public with philosophical interests--such as The Philosopher's Magazine). These public pieces will summarize information from the academic articles.

ASU Resources Statement

I plan to consult with ASU researchers on this project. I will seek the help of Derek Powell regarding the survey and corpus projects. Derek is an assistant professor of Behavioral Data science and the head of the Cognitive Data Lab at the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences. He is also a former engineer at Meta (Facebook). Derek will be able to provide expert advice on the technical aspects of the project including the experimental surveys and corpus research work. Powell was a former undergraduate student of mine and we have co-authored pieces on experimental epistemology. There are also researchers at ASU who have done work on conspiracy theories whose expertise I can draw from: Keith Brown (Director of the Melikian Center: Russian, Eurasian and East European Studies, and Professor in the School of Politics and Global Studies), and Jennifer Sandlin (associate professor of justice and social inquiry). I have already contacted Derek Powell and Keith Brown about this, and they have agreed to be consultants.

Project Timeline and Activities.

Research Activities: I will write at least three papers on each of the research areas I discussed above (surveys, corpus research, conspiracy theories). At the public conference, I will be able to present some of this work in progress and I will be able to get feedback on this work. In addition, I will get new ideas from the participants. When I write the public pieces, I will summarize and incorporate ideas from the academic papers and the conference.

May 2023: Invite Keynote speaker for Conference in January 2024

June 2023: Put out call for papers for conference in January 2024. Book site for conference at ASU. Reserve hotel room for speaker

July 2023: Begin two of three research projects. Come up with survey studies to test whether the public react to skeptical scenarios. Consult with Powell about setting up corpus research.

August 2023: Begin research on detailed descriptions of conspiracy theories.

September 2023: CFP papers are due. Read papers and select participants.

October-December: Continue research on topics.

January 2024: Conference (including presenting work in progress)

February-July 2024: Begin writing three academic papers based on earlier research and conference feedback.

April 2024: (a) NEH Fellowship application due (propose to write a book linking together the three themes of the seed grant). (b) NEH award for faculty at Hispanic serving institutions due. The deadlines have not been set for 2024, but they were in April ion 2023.

May 2024: Write public piece. Apply for Templeton Grant Online Funding Inquiry (Philosophy and Theology Grant). There is no deadline for the Templeton Grant OFI.

June 2024: Pitch public piece to various public facing venues

July 2024: Seek feedback on academic papers

August 2024: Begin submitting papers to academic journals.

Expenses and Justification

EXPENSES:

A. Personnel Costs

Student hired at \$15 an hour, for 10 hours a week for the academic year (24 weeks—
August 2023 to May 2024)

\$3600 plus 4.25% = \$3753

B. Conference

Keynote Speaker Honorarium: \$500

Keynote Speaker Flight: \$700

Keynote Speaker Hotel (3 nights): \$1000

Keynote Speaker Meals and Incidentals: \$400

Conference coffee and refreshments (2 days): \$300

Conference dinners (x2): \$800

Total Conference Expenses: \$3700

C. Experiments

Compensation for participants= \$800

Subtotal= \$8253

Administrative Service Charge= \$702

Total= \$ 8953

JUSTIFICATION:

For (A), a student assistant will be needed to help with all stages of research.
For (B), the conference will help advance and define the state-of-the art for real world applications of philosophical skepticism.
For (C), paying subjects to take surveys in experiments is required carry out quality research.

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Pinillos, N. Á., Jaramillo, S., & Horne, Z. (2019). Asymmetric belief sensitivity and justification explain the Wells Effect. In *Proceedings of the 41st Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society: Creativity + Cognition + Computation, CogSci 2019* (pp. 2578-2584).

Pinillos, N. Ángel (forthcoming) *Why We Doubt: A Cognitive Account of Our Skeptical Inclinations*. Oxford University Press: Oxford UK

Worsnip, Alex (2021). The Skeptic and the Climate Change Skeptic. In Michael Hannon & Jeroen de Ridder (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Political Epistemology*. Routledge.

CV

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EDUCATION

Ph.D., Philosophy, Rutgers University. October 2006
Certificate in Cognitive Science. Rutgers University.

B.S., Mathematics, Tufts University. May 1996

ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT

Associate Professor of Philosophy (with tenure) (2012-)
Assistant Professor of Philosophy (2006-2012)

Philosophy Faculty
School of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies
Arizona State University, Tempe AZ

BOOKS

Why We Doubt: A Cognitive Account of Our Skeptical Inclinations. Oxford University Press 2023 [in production]

ARTICLES

Pinillos, N.A. 'Contextualist Explanations of Our Skeptical Intuitions' Essays in Honor of Stewart Cohen. Juan Comesana and Matthew McGrath (Eds).

Pinillos, N.A. Bank Cases and Stakes. Forthcoming *Oxford Studies in Experimental Philosophy* Joshua Knobe and Shaun Nichols (Eds)

- Pinillos, N.A., Bayesian Sensitivity Principles for Evidence Based Knowledge. 2022 *Philosophical Studies*.
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- Pinillos, N.A., Sara Jaramillo, Zachary Horne. (2019). Asymmetric belief sensitivity and justification explain the Wells Effect. *Proceedings of the 41st Annual Conference of the Cognitive Science Society*.
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IHR SEED GRANT SIGNATURE PAGE

Please gather signatures from all PIs and Co-PIs and unit Directors/Heads. Add lines as needed.

Signature of the applicant(s):



_____ Date: 3/20/23

_____ Date: _____

_____ Date: _____

Printed name + signature of unit head(s):

_____ Date: _____

_____ Date: _____

_____ Date: _____

If you are requesting a course buyout, unit head must sign a second time to indicate agreement with the amount of between \$6300 -\$7500 (inclusive of ERE).