



Annalisa Coliva and Duncan Pritchard, "Skepticism"

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Annalisa Coliva and Duncan Pritchard. *Skepticism*. Routledge 2021. 212 pp. \$128.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780367178314); \$35.96 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780367178352).

While philosophy is the science of knowledge, skepticism, an old philosophical view which questions the very possibility of knowledge, seems to challenge the basic principles of such a science. If no knowledge is possible, because we cannot even be sure, for example, that we have hands let alone that any hand exists, we are left with speculations, and love of wisdom changes into love of a well-made illusion. That was why Immanuel Kant in *Critique of Pure Reason* started his reform of metaphysics: he wanted to render it defensible against skepticism (see Michal N. Forster, *Kant on Skepticism*, Princeton University Press 2010). However, much newer attempts to fight skepticism have been made, and, out of the most recent ones, the current book by Annalisa Coliva and Duncan Pitchard deserves to be named.

The book, actually much more a summary textbook for all students of philosophy and those interested in skepticism, deals mainly with radical skepticism, the claim that we may not be sure even of the very existence of the objects around us, including our own bodies. The book consists of seven chapters plus an introduction, and each chapter finishes by offering an overview of the relevant literature. Moreover, Coliya and Pritchard recommend two online courses (MOOCs) led by authors at the University of California be taken alongside the book (11) to get deeper under the skin of the problem. The educational value of the book is further supported by the alphabetical glossary of the most important terms (175-82) and by the very fact it was published as a part of Routledge New Problems of Philosophy series, aimed at graduate and undergraduate students of philosophy.

Throughout the book, skepticism is not taken as a real philosophical position but rather as a paradox: it starts with highly intuitive premises, employs seemingly correct reasoning and yet its conclusion is at odds with widely shared beliefs (180). The problem, of course, is that this paradox has never been acceptably answered and therefore can hardly be dismissed or ignored. However, the book examines this paradox only from the position of analytical philosophy, which cannot cross the limits of empirical evidence, logic, and language, therefore metaphysics and ontology are seen with the apparent reserve. What an average student can also miss is the historical overview and Hegel's distinction between ancient skepticism, which doubts the credibility of any knowledge related to the external world, and modern skepticism, which denies the possibility of absolute metaphysical knowledge. On top of that, there has always been a reason for the emergence of skepticism in history. Hume, for instance, did not want to attack common sense – his whole life shows that he was anything but an affected theorist – but to challenge the dogmatic philosophers and metaphysicians who continually pretended to know the things that were beyond the boundaries of their knowledge and therefore out of reach.

However, the position of the authors and the purpose of the book is analytic, therefore, it is the analysis of the radical skeptical paradox that matters the most. Coliya and Pritchard first describe its various forms, with an emphasis on Cartesian and Humean version, because while Pyrrhonian skepticism was mostly an ethical position, Descartes articulated the radical, skeptical hypothesis that we are either in a vivid dream or deceived by an evil demon (19), later developed into a brain-in-a-



vat problem. Then in Chapter 2 (30-57), the semantic and epistemic externalist response to radical skepticism is examined. Here the anti-skeptical conclusion of David Davidson, that belief is in its nature veridical, is discussed (36-39) and its criticism is also introduced. It leans on the claim that we are obliged to *treat* our beliefs as mostly true, but it doesn't mean they *are* mostly true. David Chalmers's twist from the skeptical hypothesis to metaphysical hypothesis is also mentioned (41), but, due to the authors' concentration on the core of skepticism, the radical skeptical brain-in-a-vat hypothesis, it is not given much weight.

The skeptical paradox can be seemingly blocked for at least some epistemic operators under known entailment by the simple denial of the closure principle as Robert Nozick did. Coliya and Pritchard add the contextualist response to such a denial. Very aptly, they notice that by assigning skepticism very little relevance, contextualism does not solve any of its objections, but only lowers the standards from a philosophical to an ordinary context, which does not explain why the now-irrelevant skepticism deserves their time and denial. In Chapter 4, they finally turn to hinge epistemology built on Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*, which is obviously their main interest. Chapter 5, therefore, examines the epistemological disjunctivism of John McDowell and Duncan Pritchard. Since all these chapters take up the Cartesian version of skepticism, from Chapter 6 on, Humean skepticism is given attention. First G. E. Moore's common-sense response to idealism and skepticism is investigated, then Jim Pryor's liberal account of perceptual justification is considered and its reduction of skepticism to a disease one shouldn't catch is rightly refused (125). The last chapter deals with naturalism, contextualism and constitutivism as three varieties of hinge epistemology, where the last one is the field of Annalisa Coliva's own research. Therefore, her constructivist version of hinge epistemology is offered here (162-73).

Hinge epistemology is supposed to be the conclusion of the book and the answer to skepticism. It is an epistemological view based on the assertion that there are certain claims or commitments which can't be questioned, supported, or undermined, because the rest of epistemic investigation stands on them, so they have to stay fixed like the hinges of the door. One such constitutive assumption is the claim: I have hands. However, such a conclusion leaves the reader similarly unconvinced that external reality exists, as Descartes's *Meditations* leave him unconvinced that God exists. The hinge commitments such as 'I have hands' are epistemically rational because they constitute epistemic rationality, but we are supposed to manage with them despite the fact they are unjustifiable.

Though it would be unfair to expect a solution to the ancient problem of skepticism from a textbook, especially as nothing like that was promised, a thorough grounding in contemporary debates was promised. That is what we get, together with the overview of the content externalism of Putnam, Davidson and Chalmers, a wide range of interpretations of Wittgenstein's hinge epistemology, which the authors themselves consider the main novelty of the book (10). As I noted above, some reservations may be raised about the name of the book, since its history is not presented, religious and scientific skepticism is unaddressed, and only the analytic position is taken up. *Philosophical Skepticism. An Analytic Approach* would be more apt title for the book. However, the explanations are well-written and quite well-argued, sometimes even with the help of modern examples such as

the popular *Matrix* movies. The e-book's glossary is accessible through the underlined links throughout the text, which will help students not to get lost, and the hyperlinked bibliography is also a good benefit. Skepticism, as it is presented in the book, is, therefore, faithful to its ancient meaning: *skeptikos* (an inquirer) is supposed to be an unsatisfied person who looks for the truth. Duncan Pritchard and Annalisa Coliva's book will definitely show her where to look for it.

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