Skepticism and the Skeptical Skeptics Who Use It

Christiane Wisehart (producer): Examining Ethics with Andy Cullison is hosted by the Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

Sandra Bertin (producer): The views expressed here are the opinions of the individual speakers alone. They do not represent the position of DePauw University or The Prindle Institute.

Sandra: Hi everyone, I'm Sandra Bertin, one of the producers of the show. And there's something you all need to know about me, which is that I am obsessed with religion. I studied religion in college, and I'm always reading books about religion, it's just a subject that fascinates me. So I make a habit of visiting sort of different religious sites, and so the Creation Museum in Kentucky has been at the top of my list for a really long time. And so for those of you who might not know, the Creation Museum is a museum that supports the creationist view of the creation of the world, which is that God made the world in seven days according to Genesis. And one of the most important beliefs of the Creation Museum is that the world is only about 6,000 years old, which means that they have a really big problem with the way that evolutionary scientists kind of describe the creation of the world as we know it today over millions of years. So at the museum, I finally got to go and when you first walk in, the first exhibit that you see is about canyons.

[sound clip from museum video: It's commonly taught that canyons are formed by rivers over a very long time. We know that the mud flows from the crater of Mount St. Helens carved this canyon out of soft rocks in only hours and this canyon out of solid rock in less than four years. So how were canyons really formed?**]**

Sandra: So, "Couldn't it be possible that all canyons were formed instantaneously?" And I just got this super weird feeling about this video. I realized that all of these exhibits had in common this sort of skepticism. They weren't presenting evidence on their own, they weren't saying well, we have counter evidence that the Grand Canyon was formed instantaneously, all they were saying was that couldn't it be? Couldn't it be possible that they were all formed immediately? And it just felt like that sort of skepticism felt strange. So I just felt really icky about the way these exhibits were set up and I really didn't know if it was because I was biased against the subject matter or if there's actually something wrong with the way skepticism was being used as a tool in these exhibits. So I brought that back to Christiane and Andy so that we could figure out is skepticism a good or bad tool to use? Is it, like, at what point does it become bad, if ever, and what are the ethical implications of using skepticism as an argumentative tool?

{Theme tune begins}

Sandra: Hi Christiane!

Christiane: Hi Sandra!

Sandra: Ready to talk about skepticism?

Christiane: I am, but man I'm getting distracted by this creationism thing.

Sandra: Oh no, why?

Christiane: I just want to argue against creationism for the theory of evolution. But that's not what we're supposed to do today, right? That's not what we're talking about.

Sandra: No we're not going to do that. And I realize that it is a contentious issue and that we're going to have super strong feelings about it on either side. But we're not going to go there, we're just going to talk about skepticism.

Christiane: Okay so, if you're like me, and you get very distracted by this creation versus evolution thing that we kind of started out with, what are some examples of skepticism that can steer us away from that distraction.

Sandra: Okay that's a really good idea--Tell me any fact.

Christiane: I am speaking into a microphone right now.

Sandra: Um, actually, what if the microphone is just a figment of your imagination and there's no microphone there at all. WHOA! I blew your mind. Update: Christiane's mind has been blown.

Christiane: Yeah so that's the brand of skepticism that's like, what if nothing is real?

Sandra: Right, it's like you're in the matrix and it's like, nothing you've ever thought is real.

Christiane: Okay so that's a pretty extreme form of skepticism and kind an annoying one, too. But I use skepticism in my everyday life and I'm sure you do, too. What are some kind of more everyday examples of skepticism?

Sandra: Okay! Yeah, so skepticism where people would just think you're being smart and like cautious, is when you evaluate, let's say a news source for any biases that they might have. So for example, when you might watch MSNBC, you're thinking, okay I should take this with a grain of salt because this is very left-leaning, or when you watch Fox News, same thing, you're taking it with a grain of salt because it's kind of right-leaning. So that's--you know you're evoking some skepticism there, but a lot of people I think would say that that's a healthy way to go about your life. And what's interesting is the people we talked to, they actually have different ideas of

skepticism based on their discipline, their different disciplines. It's pretty cool, so we talked to two different philosophers, first, our very own Andy Cullison--

Christiane: Host of Examining Ethics.

Sandra: That is correct, yes. And Barry Lam.

Christiane: Host of Hi-Phi Nation.

Sandra: That is also correct. And he actually also is a philosophy professor at Vassar.

Christiane: We also talk to a geologist, and she teachers here at DePauw University. Her name is Jeanne Pope. So when I, when I generally think of philosophers, like the stereotype that I associate with philosophers is like, that kind of, "how do you know that it's not a dream," that kind of thinking? (laughter)

Sandra: Yeah, I definitely think that is a stereotype, which is interesting because Andy told us about a survey that was done that might show that that is not true.

Andy Cullison (host): There was a survey of philosophers, maybe five years ago, where they just wanted to figure out are there any views in philosophy that are common to all philosophers. And actually anti-skepticism was by far the most common of all the views out there. So I think 81% of philosophers embraced what you might call non-skeptical realism, which is they're not skeptics. They think we can know stuff about the external world. They think we can know that there is an external world and that you know a lot of the things that we think ourselves to know we do know. And only like 4% of them were inclined to accept skepticism about the external world.

Sandra: So whereas in real life if I was using the phrase skepticism, I would be talking about someone just saying like, "I don't believe you," in philosophy, it's actually the idea that we can't know anything, you can't know you have two hands kind of thinking. And, so when Andy says that most philosophers don't believe in skepticism, that's the skepticism they're talking about.

Andy: A lot of people think that the way to be smart is skeptical. Philosophers wouldn't say that. That's ironic because most people think philosophy is the home for skepticism, we're the ones who are supposed to be the skeptics, we were the ones who are supposed to be raising doubt about everything. But it's ironic that most philosophers think that a very common kind of skepticism is not true.

Sandra: What's that common kind of skepticism?

Andy: That you can't know things about the world outside your own head.

Sandra: Is this like a matrix type of philosophy? Like this chair isn't really real, it's that kind of thing?

Andy: Yeah, it's that kind of thing.

Sandra: Okay, so basically you're saying that philosophers throw out that kind of skepticism?

Andy: Yeah, they throw out that kind of skepticism, but they also throw out other kinds of skepticism because they show that it leads to that kind of skepticism. It's very difficult to be skeptical about other things just by raising a little bit of doubt. Because most philosophers will say, "No, no, no, you can't do that, because that commits you to not being able to know anything about the world."

Christiane: But that type of skepticism that philosophers throw out, that's not the only type of skepticism, right?

Sandra: Right, and philosopher Barry Lam actually told us that using skepticism might be good for you based on what kind of person you are.

Barry Lam: I think skepticism is a very important tool especially for people who find themselves, for lack of a better term, credulous. People who tend to be very trusting of not just authority, including scientific authority, or religious authority, or whatever, but people who just tend to believe a lot. You know? There are different kinds of people. Some people just tend to just believe everything somebody tells them. I think that that attitude, when carried out too far, can be a very harmful thing both to an individual and especially to their decision making.

Christiane: The way Barry describes it, there's actually a kind of spectrum of skepticism. And he says that the way that another philosopher William James explains it, is really useful.

Barry: So, the way that James wanted us to think about it, is that some people are really afraid of being duped. One of the worst things that can happen is if you believe something and it's just wrong, right? So you've been duped. That attitude that you should be afraid of being duped so much so that you should be very, very cautious in whether you start believing something. That kind of attitude you might call skeptical, right. That's the kind of attitude that you're going to have very high standards for when you believe something, or when you're going to act on something. On the other end of that spectrum, are people who are not that afraid of being duped, don't find it all that bad if you end up believing things that turnout to be wrong. So what? You get this benefit where if you're more open to the world and just believe a lot more, then you're going to get a lot of things right too even if you end up believing a lot of things that are wrong. I don't think there is a consensus about what the right place on that spectrum is. Obviously, you don't want to go around believing everything. But on the other hand, I think James had a point. If you set your standards way too high, you are not opening up yourself to things that could be right on the off chance that they're wrong.

Sandra: But as Barry let me know, the philosopher William James is actually biased against skepticism, which is why he framed it as being afraid and not being skeptical as being open. So he actually reframed it for me, so that I could hear what it sounds like from the other perspective.

Barry: You know, there's another way to frame it, and I don't know, people can think about it for themselves, is carefulness versus sloppiness. When you start believing things based without having high standards, that's sloppiness as supposed to being careful.

Christiane: And for a scientist like Jeanne Pope, it's, it's about being cautious.

Jeanne Pope: I think that skepticism in science is important. I think that scientists are taught to be cautious or to be hesitant towards accepting. That you want to have very high standards for accepting a particular criterion as being valid. We talk about the process of validation, what makes something a valid observation or what makes something a valid data point. There is a process for that, which is why we talk about the process of science. And so one always has to have that space for an alternative hypothesis, for another explanation.

Sandra: Though Jeanne associates skepticism and caution together, Andy actually thinks there's actually a really important difference between the two.

Andy: Being somewhat cautious in what you accept and taking efforts to look at what all the evidence is, all the evidence that's available to you, that's a little bit different than saying any time you're given evidence imagine some possibility that the evidence doesn't rule out and then say, "We still don't know the truth yet." It's one thing to say, "Weigh your evidence carefully. Try to figure out which of the plausible hypotheses it supports." That's just- that's critical thinking. Radical skepticism is just any time you're presented with evidence you can always imagine a possibility that your evidence doesn't rule out.

[music]

Sandra: So we've heard from Andy, Jeanne and Barry about their overall feelings of skepticism, but now I want to know, is there a good philosophical reason for me to just like throw out someone's argument because of the skepticism they're using?

Christiane: Yeah, because like I use skepticism in my everyday life all the time I hear other people use it all the time, and I'm fine with it, but there are other instances, like with the Creation Museum and the way that they use skepticism, and I'm not fine with it, and you're not fine with it, right?

Sandra: Yeah.

Christiane. And so it'd be nice to figure out when can we throw out skepticism because in and of itself it's bad reasoning.

Sandra: Yeah, and so we can know whether we're just being biased against a group of people or a set of beliefs or when we can just throw out an argument because it's badly reasoned.

Christiane: And so Andy gave us a little puzzle to think about to help us think through whether or not a particular brand of skepticism is bad reasoning or not.

Andy: There's actually a well known puzzle in philosophy of science that in many ways just is the traditional skeptical argument. The grue paradox or puzzle is a kind of puzzle for anyone who thinks you can confirm a hypothesis like all emeralds are green just based on observation in the world. Because how might you do this? You go around and you look at some emeralds. Here's an emerald that's green, here's an emerald, it's green. Look at enough emeralds over time and eventually you're going to come to the reasonable conclusion that all emeralds are green. The problem is there are lots of different hypotheses that are consistent with you having looked and seen that all the emeralds you've observed are green. Here's one, here's a hypothesis, all emeralds are grue, which just means green while somebody's looking at them, and blue when no one is looking at them. The weird thing about that hypothesis, all emeralds are grue, the evidence you have when you think all emeralds are green, is exactly the same evidence you would have if all emeralds are grue. So the idea is your evidence is underdetermined. It doesn't uniquely determine one of those because that's exactly what the evidence would look like on either case. The idea that the world is structured such that emeralds magically switch color when people are looking away, that's a more complicated hypothesis. A lot of times people will appeal to simplicity. That's how they solve the puzzle.

Christiane: So it seems like he's saying, if you have two options, and one is simpler and seems to mesh with the observable world, and the other one is super complicated, the simpler one is the way to go.

Sandra: Yes. I think he's pretty ready to throw the whole grue hypothesis out the window. And it's actually really interesting because Jeanne doesn't agree.

Jeanne Pope: It is helpful. So here's why it's helpful. Do you want to know why it's helpful? Because you can test it. You can design an experiment around it. You can validate that they are blue or they're not blue. That's why it's science. One of two things will happen. Either the theory will stand or it will be disproven. That's the really really cool thing about science. Now I'm just going to totally geek out. That's actually what's good about it is that people are invited to challenge. So this gets to your nature of why is skepticism good? Skepticism invites you to challenge the theory in order to be able to demonstrate its robustness.

Christiane: So I can see why, like as a scientist Jeanne doesn't mind when somebody brings up something like the grue hypothesis, because she can just test it, and I can see why that's helpful

for science, but I still have a problem with this brand of skepticism in everyday life because it--in everyday conversations, this kind of unnecessarily complicated hypothesis just kind of shuts the conversation down and stops it.

Sandra: Yeah, Barry and Andy actually talk about how annoying this is in philosophical conversations, too.

Barry: You're actually touching upon probably what is the most used technique for making people feel skeptical, which is to provide a possible alternative explanation without having to show that that alternative explanation is in any way likely, or has evidence that it's true, or anything like that. I think if that argument already leads me to thinking that there's no knowledge at all anywhere, then there's something wrong with that kind of arguing, because I know in the philosophy classroom, that those kinds of arguments are basically irresolvable.

Andy: I think the problem is it's a very narrow and high standard view about what it takes to know something or have a reasonable belief. Go back to skeptical arguments that say, "You can't know that you're not in the matrix right now." That's a really high standard. Unless you can rule out that you're not some bodiless brain in a vat hooked up to a super computer then I reject your knowledge claim. That's a really, really high standard.

Christiane: So, so if we're trying to puzzle out when skepticism might not be a valuable tool in an argument, I think what Barry and Andy are saying is that that point might be when we say, "We might not know anything, or that, nothing might be real"

Sandra: Yeah I think that's exactly what they would say. And it's interesting because again, Jeanne's line might be something different. She might- she might not even have a line, it's more like, there's pros and cons to using skepticism, every time you use it.

Jeanne: Unfortunately it's both. In all honesty, there's been this training toward caution, it just comes as a habit, also. Therefore, it can be problematic because it can be hard to get over your own self. Caution I still think is good, but getting over your own self is also good. Being open, too. That's the downside, I suppose. The downside of being cautious, the downside of skepticism is that you might not be open to seeing the evidence. You might be in fact too bogged down or mired in what you think is already true. You've already come to a conclusion.

[transition music]

Sandra: So that icky feeling that I had when I was at the Creation Museum, looking at all of these exhibits with skeptical arguments. I was wondering not only if that was bad reasoning, but I was also wondering if there was something ethically wrong with using skepticism in this way. So I brought that question back to Andy and he told me about this idea about inconsistent application of skepticism.

Andy: I think in certain cases if you appeal to skepticism to say preserve or bolster a certain view but you're not doing it consistently I think there's an ethical issue. If you immediately go to high standards skepticism whenever your world view's being challenged, but then you boldly proclaim all kinds of things all the time that don't meet that high standard that you're holding everyone else to, I think there's a serious ethical issue there. I have respect for someone who wants to bite the bullet and say, "I don't even know I have two hands." That's the 4% of philosophers out there. It's just inconsistent applications for standards of knowledge. Everyone else who disagrees with me has to meet this uber high standard, but I'm allowed to go around and assert whatever the heck I want with almost no evidence whatsoever and I don't have to meet that high standard for anything that I'm claiming. That's where I think you run into ethical issues and I think you see that a lot.

Christiane: So Sandra, I think you and I were both really taken with Andy's idea of the selective application of skepticism and how that might be bad.

Sandra: Yeah definitely. It's interesting because later when we brought this idea up to Barry, he actually pointed out a time when it might make sense to selectively apply skepticism.

Barry: Suppose we have a high schooler and they say, "I've just refuted the ideal gas law. See, I did this experiment and it came out different from what everybody accepts it should come out as." Somebody says, "No. You're just wrong. You made a mistake." Is that morally wrong? It doesn't seem like it. Of course, that's the right thing to say in that case. But like, why is that? Why is one reaction the right reaction versus..Well it's gotta be that you think that this established set of beliefs that come from like, history or a lot of people is subject to a different set of standards than your own little experiment. Like you don't get to make somebody skeptical of something in chemistry because you, a high schooler, happened to have done an experiment. So, what's the issue here? The issue is, we don't know, we don't quite know when making something fit is right, or when it's wrong. And that's hard. That's the hard problem.

Sandra: I feel like that high school experiment example really did a good job of showing me how inconsistently applied skepticism is actually really useful sometimes.

Christiane: Yeah, it--it's a kind of shortcut that you need to function in the world, right? And I can see that point for sure, but you know we come back to this often on the show, but I think inconsistently applied skepticism can also lead to things like epistemic injustice, and specifically the part of epistemic injustice called testimonial injustice, which is when you fail to give somebody that you're listening to credibility because of some kind of prejudice on your part.

Sandra: Yeah, that's a really good point, and Andy actually brought up that argument as a reason why inconsistently applied skepticism is no bueno.

Andy: You don't take someone's testimony seriously because they could be lying, but you only take the, "They could be lying and I can't rule out that they're lying" claim seriously if it happens

to be a person of color or a female or something like that. If someone were rejecting testimony based on what could be the case, or it hasn't been ruled out yet, but would readily accept that testimony in almost any other circumstance if it were a white man they'd be doing that too, the inconsistent applications of the standards for knowledge.

Christiane: Okay so we've listened to people talk about how skepticism might be valuable, and where skepticism might be problematic, and I'm still not 100% sure where I fall in all of that. And I still need to think through it a little more, but the one thing that I think I am going to take away from this show is that I just need to be very critical--self critical of the way that I use skepticism in arguments in my own life. And maybe just watch myself when I'm being skeptical and just make sure I'm applying it evenly.

Sandra: Yeah I agree with that. What I was thinking was being really aware of when someone's trying to convince me of something using skepticism as their argument. I think I'm going to try to be really really careful to not buy into that. And I've actually been noticing a lot of time these skeptical arguments don't happen face to face, they actually happen online. And especially memes, I don't know if you've noticed that, Christiane, but I think every meme on my Facebook is just like a hot mess of a skeptical argument. And like I remember the other day I saw this one that was saying that the DNC hackers weren't Russian, because hackers know how to cover their tracks and so because you think it's Russia, it's not Russia.

Christiane: So it's basically that brand of radical skepticism where it just--memes just kind of shut the conversation down, and you can't talk about it any more.

Sandra: Yeah, like this meme literally says, "If you think something, then you don't know it." Like because you think it, you're wrong.

Christiane: Yeah, memes basically just drop the mic and leave the room, right?

Sandra: Yeah.

[music]

Sandra: So that's our show for today, guys, but before you all leave, I have a super quick quiz question for you. And that question is: How much do you love our show between 1-10? Doodoooodooodododoodododo [attempts tune of the Jeopardy theme]

Christiane: Stop, that's a copyrighted song.

Sandra: Wait what? Oh I didn't realize. Anyway, 10? Am I hearing 10?

Christiane: I heard a 10!

Sandra: If you answered 10, go ahead and shout from the rooftops your lukewarm approval-great enjoyment of this podcast.

Christiane: There is another option to getting on your rooftops real quick. You could just tell your friends. That works too.

Sandra: No, I'm definitely thinking the rooftop is a better option.

Christiane: Or give us a 5 star rating on itunes….

Sandra: YOUR ROOF SEEMS REAL NICE RIGHT NOW

Christiane: Or you can reach out to us on Twitter, where you can find us @examiningethics on Twitter. You can also find us on Facebook.

Sandra: If you are not going to shout from your rooftop--

Christiane: Which is fine, don't get on your rooftops, guys.

Sandra: I'd be pretty happy to hear from you via email. If you have a comment in general about Examining Ethics, or anything you'd like to talk related to skepticism, email us a voice memo. You can send that to examiningethics@gmail.com, that's examiningethics@gmail.com.

Christiane: Alright that's our show! Until the last Wednesday in February, have a good month!
Sandra: Bye!

[music]

Credits:
Hi, this is Examining Ethics' number one fan, Avra Dugan. Examining Ethics with Andy Cullison is hosted by the Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University. Sandra Bertin and Christiane Wisehart produced the show. Our logo was created by Evie Brosius. Our music is by Cory Gray, Podington Bear, and Jason Leonard, and can be found online at freemusicarchive.ORG. Examining Ethics is made possible by the generous support of DePauw Alumni, friends of the Prindle Institute, and you the listeners. And special thanks to the Creation Museum.