

112 These, then, are my last words to you: Be not afraid of life. Believe that life *is* worth living, and your belief will help create the fact. The 'scientific proof' that you are right may not be clear before the day of judgment (or some stage of being which that expression may serve to symbolize) is reached. But the faithful fighters of this hour, or the beings that then and there will represent them, may then turn to the faint-hearted, who here decline to go on, with words like those with which Henry IV greeted the tardy Crillon after a great victory had been gained: "Hang yourself, brave Crillon! we fought at Arques, and you were not there."

William James, *Is Life Worth Living?*

113 It is not disbelief that is dangerous in our society: it is belief.

Shaw, *Androcles and the Lion*, Pref.

114 William James accomplished a new advance in Pragmatism by his theory of the will to believe, or as he himself later called it, the right to believe. The discovery of the fundamental consequences of one or another belief has without fail a certain influence on that belief itself. If a man cherishes novelty, risk, opportunity and a variegated esthetic reality, he will certainly reject any belief in Monism, when he clearly perceives the import of this system. But if, from the very start, he is attracted by esthetic harmony, classic proportions, fixity even to the extent of absolute security, and logical coherence, it is quite natural that he should put faith in Monism. Thus William James took into account those motives of instinctive sympathy which play a greater rôle in our choice of a

philosophic system than do formal reasonings; and he thought that we should be rendering a service to the cause of philosophical sincerity if we would openly recognize the motives which inspire us. He also maintained the thesis that the greater part of philosophic problems and especially those which touch on religious fields are of such a nature that they are not susceptible of decisive evidence one way or the other. Consequently he claimed the right of a man to choose his beliefs not only in the presence of proofs or conclusive facts, but also in the absence of all such proof. Above all when he is forced to choose between one meaning or another, or when by refusing to choose he has a right to assume the risks of faith, his refusal is itself equivalent to a choice. The theory of the will to believe gives rise to misunderstandings and even to ridicule; and therefore it is necessary to understand clearly in what way James used it. We are always obliged to act in any case; our actions and with them their consequences actually change according to the beliefs which we have chosen. Moreover it may be that, in order to discover the proofs which will ultimately be the intellectual justification of certain beliefs—the belief in freedom, for example, or the belief in God—it is necessary to begin to act in accordance with this belief.

Dewey, *Development of American Pragmatism*

115 Dogmas are at their best when nobody denies them, for then their falsehood sleeps, like that of an unconscious metaphor, and their moral function is discharged instinctively.

Santayana, *Life of Reason*, III, 5

## 6.6 | Doubt and Skepticism

It is not in the sphere of opinion or belief, but rather with respect to matters about which men claim to have knowledge, that doubt operates critically. Whatever is a matter of opinion or belief, even if appraised as highly probable, is subject to doubt. But when men claim to have certitude in their knowledge or possession of the truth, they

hold what they affirm or deny to be beyond all reasonable doubt. It is such certitude that the skeptic challenges by his doubts.

As the passages collected here plainly show, skepticism is both an attitude of mind and a systematic method of dealing with the whole range of human opinions, beliefs, and claims to knowledge. In its ancient as well as

in its modern forms, it sometimes goes to the extreme of universal doubt. We can have certainty about nothing, nor can we even validly assert that one proposition is more probable than another. One opinion is as good as another; all are equally true or false. The reader will find among the passages quoted, arguments against such extreme skepticism that take the form of reduction to absurdity: the skeptic cannot say that no statement is true without contradicting himself, for if his own statement is false, then at least some statements are true; and if his own statement is true, then it is false that no statements are true. Should the skeptic refuse to acknowledge the force of this argument, because he is willing to embrace self-contradiction, nothing remains to be said. Conversation between the extreme skeptic and his opponent must cease.

In other quotations the reader will find a more moderate skepticism recommended as a therapeutic method, seeking to sift the claims to knowledge and to winnow those that are valid from those that are without foundation. This is the method of beginning by doubting everything in order to come at last to the few things that one cannot doubt, and to discover from an examination of these the criteria of certitude. Moderate skepticism also takes the form of attenuating universal doubt by conceding moral or prac-

tical certitude to the beliefs one must embrace in order to carry on the conduct of one's life from day to day. The attempt to maintain a middle position between extreme skepticism, on the one hand, and extreme dogmatism, on the other, is sometimes described as being properly critical rather than skeptical. The reader will discern these nuances of method in quotations from Descartes, Hume, and Kant; but it is by reading the passages taken from Montaigne that he will become acquainted with skepticism as an attitude of mind that is both tolerant and uncompromising.

In still other passages, the reader will discover the range of reasons that are offered for the doubt or uncertainty that generates one or another form of skepticism: mistrust of the senses based on the illusions and hallucinations to which they are subject; mistrust of intellectual judgments based on the fallibility of the intellect and the errors to which it is prone; mistrust of even widely held opinions or firmly established beliefs based on the fact that contrary opinions and beliefs have also been regarded as acceptable or settled. It will be seen that the opponents of skepticism, certainly in its extreme form, do not dismiss such doubts as groundless, but rather try to confine them to the areas in which they are justified.

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1 *Socrates*. What, according to you and your friend Gorgias, is the definition of virtue?

*Meno*. O Socrates, I used to be told, before I knew you, that you were always doubting yourself and making others doubt; and now you are casting your spells over me, and I am simply getting bewitched and enchanted, and am at my wits' end. And if I may venture to make a jest upon you, you seem to me both in your appearance and in your power over others to be very like the flat torpedo fish, who torpifies those who come near him and touch him, as you have now torpified me, I think. For my soul and my tongue are really torpid, and I do not know how to answer you; and

though I have been delivered of an infinite variety of speeches about virtue before now, and to many persons—and very good ones they were, as I thought—at this moment I cannot even say what virtue is. And I think that you are very wise in not voyaging and going away from home, for if you did in other places as you do in Athens, you would be cast into prison as a magician.

*Soc*. You are a rogue, Meno, and had all but caught me.

*Men*. What do you mean, Socrates?

*Soc*. I can tell why you made a simile about me.

*Men*. Why?

*Soc*. In order that I might make another simile

about you. For I know that all pretty young gentlemen like to have pretty similes made about them—as well they may—but I shall not return the compliment. As to my being a torpedo, if the torpedo is torpid as well as the cause of torpidity in others, then indeed I am a torpedo, but not otherwise; for I perplex others, not because I am clear, but because I am utterly perplexed myself. And now I know not what virtue is, and you seem to be in the same case, although you did once perhaps know before you touched me.

Plato, *Meno*, 79B

- 2 *Socrates*. Tell me, Theodorus, do you suppose that you yourself, or any other follower of Protagoras, would contend that no one deems another ignorant or mistaken in his opinion?

*Theodorus*. The thing is incredible, Socrates.

*Soc.* And yet that absurdity is necessarily involved in the thesis which declares man to be the measure of all things.

*Theod.* How so?

*Soc.* Why, suppose that you determine in your own mind something to be true, and declare your opinion to me; let us assume, as he argues, that this is true to you. Now, if so, you must either say that the rest of us are not the judges of this opinion or judgment of yours, or that we judge you always to have a true opinion? But are there not thousands upon thousands who, whenever you form a judgment, take up arms against you and are of an opposite judgment and opinion, deeming that you judge falsely?

*Theod.* Yes, indeed, Socrates, thousands and tens of thousands, as Homer says, who give me a world of trouble.

*Soc.* Well, but are we to assert that what you think is true to you and false to the ten thousand others?

*Theod.* No other inference seems to be possible.

*Soc.* And how about Protagoras himself? If neither he nor the multitude thought, as indeed they do not think, that man is the measure of all things, must it not follow that the truth of which Protagoras wrote would be true to no one? But if you suppose that he himself thought this, and that the multitude does not agree with him, you must begin by allowing that in whatever proportion the many are more than one, in that proportion his truth is more untrue than true.

*Theod.* That would follow if the truth is supposed to vary with individual opinion.

*Soc.* And the best of the joke is, that he acknowledges the truth of their opinion who believe his own opinion to be false; for he admits that the opinions of all men are true.

*Theod.* Certainly.

*Soc.* And does he not allow that his own opinion is false, if he admits that the opinion of those who think him false is true?

*Theod.* Of course.

*Soc.* Whereas the other side do not admit that they speak falsely?

*Theod.* They do not.

*Soc.* And he, as may be inferred from his writings, agrees that this opinion is also true.

*Theod.* Clearly.

*Soc.* Then all mankind, beginning with Protagoras, will contend, or rather, I should say that he will allow, when he concedes that his adversary has a true opinion—Protagoras, I say, will himself allow that neither a dog nor any ordinary man is the measure of anything which he has not learned—am I not right?

*Theod.* Yes.

*Soc.* And the truth of Protagoras being doubted by all, will be true neither to himself nor to any one else?

*Theod.* I think, Socrates, that we are running my old friend too hard.

Plato, *Theaetetus*, 170B

- 3 All statements cannot be false nor all true, both because of many other difficulties which might be adduced as arising from this position, and because if all are false it will not be true to say even this, and if all are true it will not be false to say all are false.

Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1063<sup>b</sup>30

- 4 If a man believe that nothing is known, he knows not whether this even can be known, since he admits he knows nothing. I will therefore decline to argue the case against him who places himself with head where his feet should be. And yet granting that he knows this, I would still put this question, since he has never yet seen any truth in things, whence he knows what knowing and not knowing severally are, and what it is that has produced the knowledge of the true and the false and what has proved the doubtful to differ from the certain.

Lucretius, *Nature of Things*, IV

- 5 But straightway Jesus spake unto them, saying, Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid.

And Peter answered him and said, Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water.

And he said, Come. And when Peter was come down out of the ship, he walked on the water, to go to Jesus.

But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me.

And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?

*Matthew* 14:27-31

- 6 But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came.

The other disciples therefore said unto him, We

have seen the Lord. But he said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe.

*John 20:24-25*

7 *Zeus*. What have we left?

*Hermes*. There is Scepticism. Come along, Pyrrhians, and be put up. Quick's the word. The attendance is dwindling; there will be small competition. Well, who buys Lot 9?

*Ninth Dealer*. I. Tell me first, though, what do you know?

*Scepticism*. Nothing.

*Ninth D*. But how's that?

*Sc*. There does not appear to me to be anything.

*Ninth D*. Are not we something?

*Sc*. How do I know that?

*Ninth D*. And you yourself?

*Sc*. Of that I am still more doubtful.

*Ninth D*. Well, you are in a fix! And what have you got those scales for?

*Sc*. I use them to weigh arguments in, and get them evenly balanced. They must be absolutely equal—not a feather-weight to choose between them; then, and not till then, can I make uncertain which is right.

*Ninth D*. What else can you turn your hand to?

*Sc*. Anything; except catching a runaway.

*Ninth D*. And why not that?

*Sc*. Because, friend, everything eludes my grasp.

*Ninth D*. I believe you. A slow, lumpish fellow you seem to be. And what is the end of your knowledge?

*Sc*. Ignorance. Deafness. Blindness.

*Ninth D*. What! sight and hearing both gone?

*Sc*. And with them judgement and perception, and all, in short, that distinguishes man from a worm.

*Ninth D*. You are worth money!—What shall we say for him?

*Her*. Four pounds.

*Ninth D*. Here it is. Well, fellow; so you are mine?

*Sc*. I doubt it.

*Ninth D*. Nay, doubt it not! You are bought and paid for.

*Sc*. It is a difficult case. . . . I reserve my decision.

*Ninth D*. Now, come along with me, like a good slave.

*Sc*. But how am I to know whether what you say is true?

*Ninth D*. Ask the auctioneer. Ask my money. Ask the spectators.

*Sc*. Spectators? But can we be sure there are any?

*Ninth D*. Oh, I'll send you to the treadmill. That will convince you with a vengeance that I am your master.

*Sc*. Reserve your decision.

*Ninth D*. Too late. It is given.

*Her*. Stop that wrangling and go with your purchaser. Gentlemen, we hope to see you here again to-morrow, when we shall be offering some lots suitable for plain men, artisans, and shopkeepers.

Lucian, *Sale of Creeds*

8 For we are, and know that we are, and delight in our being, and our knowledge of it. Moreover, in these three things no true-seeming illusion disturbs us; for we do not come into contact with these by some bodily sense, as we perceive the things outside of us—colours, e.g., by seeing, sounds by hearing, smells by smelling, tastes by tasting, hard and soft objects by touching—of all which sensible objects it is the images resembling them but not themselves which we perceive in the mind and hold in the memory, and which excite us to desire the objects. But, without any delusive representation of images or phantasms, I am most certain that I am and that I know and delight in this. In respect of these truths, I am not at all afraid of the arguments of the Academicians, who say, "What if you are deceived?" For if I am deceived, I am. For he who is not, cannot be deceived; and if I am deceived, by this same token I am. And since I am if I am deceived, how am I deceived in believing that I am? for it is certain that I am if I am deceived. Since, therefore, I, the person deceived, should be, even if I were deceived, certainly I am not deceived in this knowledge that I am. And, consequently, neither am I deceived in knowing that I know. For, as I know that I am, so I know this also, that I know. And when I love these two things, I add to them a certain third thing, namely, my love, which is of equal moment. For neither am I deceived in this, that I love, since in those things which I love I am not deceived; though even if these were false, it would still be true that I loved false things. For how could I justly be blamed and prohibited from loving false things, if it were false that I loved them? But, since they are true and real, who doubts that when they are loved, the love of them is itself true and real?

Augustine, *City of God*, XI, 26

9 *Panurge*. By the flesh, blood, and body, I swear, reswear, forswear, abjure, and renounce: he evades and avoids, shifts and escapes me, and quite slips and winds himself out of my grips and clutches.

At these words Gargantua arose, and said, Praised be the good God in all things, but especially for bringing the world into the height of refinedness beyond what it was when I first became acquainted therewith, that now the most learned and most prudent philosophers are not ashamed to be seen entering in at the porches and outhouses of the schools of the Pyrrhonian, Aporrhetic, Sceptic, and Ephetic sects. Blessed be

the holy name of God! Veritably, it is like henceforth to be found an enterprise of much more easy undertaking, to catch lions by the neck, horses by the mane, oxen by the horns, bulls by the muzzle, wolves by the tail, goats by the beard, and flying birds by the feet, than to entrap such philosophers in their words.

Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, III, 36

- 10 Ignorance that knows itself, that judges itself and condemns itself, is not complete ignorance: to be that, it must be ignorant of itself. So that the profession of the Pyrrhonians is to waver, doubt, and inquire, to be sure of nothing, to answer for nothing. Of the three functions of the soul, the imaginative, the appetitive, and the consenting, they accept the first two; the last they suspend and keep it ambiguous, without inclination or approbation, however slight, in one direction or the other.

Zeno pictured in a gesture his conception of this division of the faculties of the soul: the hand spread and open was appearance; the hand half shut and the fingers a little hooked, consent; the closed fist, comprehension; when with his left hand he closed his fist still tighter, knowledge.

Now this attitude of their judgment, straight and inflexible, taking all things in without adherence or consent, leads them to their Ataraxy, which is a peaceful and sedate condition of life, exempt from the agitations we receive through the impression of the opinion and knowledge we think we have of things. Whence are born fear, avarice, envy, immoderate desires, ambition, pride, superstition, love of novelty, rebellion, disobedience, obstinacy, and most bodily ills. Indeed, they free themselves thereby from jealousy on behalf of their doctrine. For they dispute in a very mild manner. They do not fear contradiction in their discussion. When they say that heavy things go down, they would be very sorry to have anyone take their word for it; and they seek to be contradicted, so as to create doubt and suspension of judgment, which is their goal. They advance their propositions only to combat those they think we believe in. . . .

Is it not an advantage to be freed from the necessity that curbs others? Is it not better to remain in suspense than to entangle yourself in the many errors that the human fancy has produced? Is it not better to suspend your conviction than to get mixed up in these seditious and quarrelsome divisions? . . .

The Pyrrhonians have kept themselves a wonderful advantage in combat, having rid themselves of the need to cover up. It does not matter to them that they are struck, provided they strike; and they do their work with everything. If they win, your proposition is lame; if you win, theirs is. If they lose, they confirm ignorance; if you lose, you confirm it. If they prove that nothing is

known, well and good; if they do not know how to prove it, just as good.

Montaigne, *Essays*, II, 12, Apology for Raymond Sebond

- 11 *Que sais-je?* (What do I know?)  
Montaigne (his motto)

- 12 *Hamlet*. Doubt thou the stars are fire;  
Doubt that the sun doth move;  
Doubt truth to be a liar;  
But never doubt I love.  
Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, II, ii, 116

- 13 *Othello*. Make me to see't; or, at the least, so prove it  
That the probacion bear no hinge nor loop  
To hang a doubt on; or woe upon thy life!  
*Iago*. My noble lord—  
*Oth*. If thou dost slander her and torture me,  
Never pray more; abandon all remorse;  
On horror's head horrors accumulate;  
Do deeds to make heaven weep, all earth amazed;  
For nothing canst thou to damnation add  
Greater than that.  
Shakespeare, *Othello*, III, iii, 364

- 14 If a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties.  
Bacon, *Advancement of Learning*, Bk. I, V, 8

- 15 The registering of doubts hath two excellent uses: the one, that it saveth philosophy from errors and falsehoods; when that which is not fully appearing is not collected into assertion, whereby error might draw error, but reserved in doubt: the other, that the entry of doubts are as so many suckers or sponges to draw use of knowledge; inso-much as that which, if doubts had not preceded, a man should never have advised, but passed it over without note, by the suggestion and solicitation of doubts is made to be attended and applied. But both these commodities do scarcely countervail an inconveniencce, which will intrude itself if it be not debarred; which is, that when a doubt is once received, men labour rather how to keep it a doubt still, than how to solve it; and accordingly bend their wits. Of this we see the familiar example in lawyers and scholars, both which, if they have once admitted a doubt, it goeth ever after authorized for a doubt. But that use of wit and knowledge is to be allowed, which laboureth to make doubtful things certain, and not those which labour to make certain things doubtful. Therefore these kalendars of doubts I commend as excellent things; so that there be this caution used, that when they be thoroughly sifted and brought to resolution, they be from thenceforth omitted, discarded, and not continued to cherish and encour-

age men in doubting.

Bacon, *Advancement of Learning*,  
Bk. II, VIII, 5

- 16 Our method and that of the sceptics agree in some respects at first setting out, but differ most widely, and are completely opposed to each other in their conclusion; for they roundly assert that nothing can be known; we, that but a small part of nature can be known, by the present method; their next step, however, is to destroy the authority of the senses and understanding, whilst we invent and supply them with assistance.

Bacon, *Novum Organum*, I, 37

- 17 I consider that I possess no senses; I imagine that body, figure, extension, movement and place are but the fictions of my mind. What, then, can be esteemed as true? Perhaps nothing at all, unless that there is nothing in the world that is certain.

But how can I know there is not something different from those things that I have just considered, of which one cannot have the slightest doubt? Is there not some God, or some other being by whatever name we call it, who puts these reflections into my mind? That is not necessary, for is it not possible that I am capable of producing them myself? I myself, am I not at least something? But I have already denied that I had senses and body. Yet I hesitate, for what follows from that? Am I so dependent on body and senses that I cannot exist without these? But I was persuaded that there was nothing in all the world, that there was no heaven, no earth, that there were no minds, nor any bodies: was I not then likewise persuaded that I did not exist? Not at all; of a surety I myself did exist since I persuaded myself of something [or merely because I thought of something]. But there is some deceiver or other, very powerful and very cunning, who ever employs his ingenuity in deceiving me. Then without doubt I exist also if he deceives me, and let him deceive me as much as he will, he can never cause me to be nothing so long as I think that I am something. So that after having reflected well and carefully examined all things, we must come to the definite conclusion that this proposition: I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it.

Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, II

- 18 After I have recognised that there is a God—because at the same time I have also recognised that all things depend upon Him, and that He is not a deceiver, and from that have inferred that what I perceive clearly and distinctly cannot fail to be true—although I no longer pay attention to the reasons for which I have judged this to be true, provided that I recollect having clearly and distinctly perceived it no contrary reason can be brought forward which could ever cause me to

doubt of its truth; and thus I have a true and certain knowledge of it. And this same knowledge extends likewise to all other things which I recollect having formerly demonstrated, such as the truths of geometry and the like; for what can be alleged against them to cause me to place them in doubt?

Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, V

- 19 My statement that the entire testimony of the senses must be considered to be uncertain, nay, even false, is quite serious and so necessary for the comprehension of my meditations, that he who will not or cannot admit that, is unfit to urge any objection to them that merits a reply.

Descartes, *Objections and Replies*, V

- 20 What astonishes me most is to see that all the world is not astonished at its own weakness. Men act seriously, and each follows his own mode of life, not because it is in fact good to follow since it is the custom, but as if each man knew certainly where reason and justice are. They find themselves continually deceived, and, by a comical humility, think it is their own fault and not that of the art which they claim always to possess. But it is well there are so many such people in the world, who are not sceptics for the glory of scepticism, in order to show that man is quite capable of the most extravagant opinions, since he is capable of believing that he is not in a state of natural and inevitable weakness, but, on the contrary, of natural wisdom.

Nothing fortifies scepticism more than that there are some who are not sceptics; if all were so, they would be wrong.

Pascal, *Pensées*, VI, 374

- 21 As to what is said by Descartes, that we must doubt all things in which there is the least uncertainty, it would be preferable to express it by this better and more expressive precept: We ought to think what degree of acceptance or dissent everything merits; or more simply, We ought to inquire after the reasons of any dogma. Thus the Cartesian wranglings concerning doubt would cease.

Leibniz, *Animadversions on Descartes' Principles of Philosophy*

- 22 If we will disbelieve everything, because we cannot certainly know all things, we shall do much what as wisely as he who would not use his legs, but sit still and perish, because he had no wings to fly.

Locke, *Concerning Human Understanding*, Intro.

- 23 As for our own existence, we perceive it so plainly and so certainly, that it neither needs nor is capable of any proof. For nothing can be more evident to us than our own existence. I think, I reason, I feel pleasure and pain: can any of these be more

evident to me than my own existence? If I doubt of all other things, that very doubt makes me perceive my own existence, and will not suffer me to doubt of that. For if I know I feel pain, it is evident I have as certain perception of my own existence, as of the existence of the pain I feel: or if I know I doubt, I have as certain perception of the existence of the thing doubting, as of that thought which I call doubt. Experience then convinces us, that we have an intuitive knowledge of our own existence, and an internal infallible perception that we are. In every act of sensation, reasoning, or thinking, we are conscious to ourselves of our own being; and, in this matter, come not short of the highest degree of certainty.

Loeke, *Concerning Human Understanding*,  
Bk. IV, IX, 3

- 24 As these noble Houyhnhnms are endowed by nature with a general disposition to all virtues, and have no conceptions or ideas of what is evil in a rational creature, so their grand maxim is, to cultivate *reason*, and to be wholly governed by it. Neither is *reason* among them a point problematical as with us, where men can argue with plausibility on both sides of the question; but strikes you with immediate conviction; as it must needs do where it is not mingled, obscured, or discoloured by passion and interest. I remember it was with extreme difficulty that I could bring my master to understand the meaning of the word *opinion*, or how a point could be disputable; because *reason* taught us to affirm or deny, only where we are certain; and beyond our knowledge, we cannot do either. So that controversies, wranglings, disputes, and positiveness in false or dubious propositions, are evils unknown among the Houyhnhnms. In the like manner, when I used to explain to him our several systems of *natural philosophy*, he would laugh that a creature pretending to *reason*, should value it self upon the knowledge of other peoples conjectures, and in things, where that knowledge, if it were certain, could be of no use. Wherein he agreed entirely with the sentiments of Socrates, as Plato delivers them; which I mention as the highest honour I can do that prince of philosophers.

Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, IV, 8

- 25 The Cartesian doubt . . . were it ever possible to be attained by any human creature (as it plainly is not) would be entirely incurable; and no reasoning could ever bring us to a state of assurance and conviction upon any subject.

Hume, *Concerning Human Understanding*,  
XII, 116

- 26 The great subverter of Pyrrhonism or the excessive principles of scepticism is action, and employment, and the occupations of common life. These principles may flourish and triumph in the schools; where it is, indeed, difficult, if not impos-

sible, to refute them. But as soon as they leave the shade, and by the presence of the real objects, which actuate our passions and sentiments, are put in opposition to the more powerful principles of our nature, they vanish like smoke, and leave the most determined sceptic in the same condition as other mortals.

The sceptic, therefore, had better keep within his proper sphere, and display those philosophical objections, which arise from more profound researches. Here he seems to have ample matter of triumph; while he justly insists, that all our evidence for any matter of fact, which lies beyond the testimony of sense or memory, is derived entirely from the relation of cause and effect; that we have no other idea of this relation than that of two objects, which have been frequently conjoined together; that we have no argument to convince us, that objects, which have, in our experience, been frequently conjoined, will likewise, in other instances, be conjoined in the same manner; and that nothing leads us to this inference but custom or a certain instinct of our nature; which it is indeed difficult to resist, but which, like other instincts, may be fallacious and deceitful. While the sceptic insists upon these topics, he shows his force, or rather, indeed, his own and our weakness; and seems, for the time at least, to destroy all assurance and conviction. These arguments might be displayed at greater length, if any durable good or benefit to society could ever be expected to result from them.

For here is the chief and most confounding objection to excessive scepticism, that no durable good can ever result from it; while it remains in its full force and vigour. We need only ask such a sceptic, What his meaning is? And what he proposes by all these curious researches? He is immediately at a loss, and knows not what to answer. A Copernican or Ptolemaic, who supports each his different system of astronomy, may hope to produce a conviction, which will remain constant and durable, with his audience. A Stoic or Epicurean displays principles, which may not be durable, but which have an effect on conduct and behaviour. But a Pyrrhonian cannot expect, that his philosophy will have any constant influence on the mind: or if it had, that its influence would be beneficial to society. On the contrary, he must acknowledge, if he will acknowledge anything, that all human life must perish, were his principles universally and steadily to prevail. All discourse, all action would immediately cease; and men remain in a total lethargy, till the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence. It is true; so fatal an event is very little to be dreaded. Nature is always too strong for principle. And though a Pyrrhonian may throw himself or others into a momentary amazement and confusion by his profound reasonings; the first and most trivial event in life will put to flight

all his doubts and scruples, and leave him the same, in every point of action and speculation, with the philosophers of every other sect, or with those who never concerned themselves in any philosophical researches. When he awakes from his dream, he will be the first to join in the laugh against himself, and to confess, that all his objections are mere amusement, and can have no other tendency than to show the whimsical condition of mankind, who must act and reason and believe; though they are not able, by their most diligent enquiry, to satisfy themselves concerning the foundation of these operations, or to remove the objections, which may be raised against them.

Hume, *Concerning Human Understanding*, XII, 126–128

- 27 There is, indeed, a more mitigated scepticism or academical philosophy, which may be both durable and useful, and which may, in part, be the result of this Pyrrhonism, or excessive scepticism, when its undistinguished doubts are, in some measure, corrected by common sense and reflection. The greater part of mankind are naturally apt to be affirmative and dogmatical in their opinions; and while they see objects only on one side, and have no idea of any counterpoising argument, they throw themselves precipitately into the principles, to which they are inclined; nor have they any indulgence for those who entertain opposite sentiments. To hesitate or balance perplexes their understanding, checks their passion, and suspends their action. They are, therefore, impatient till they escape from a state, which to them is so uneasy: and they think, that they could never remove themselves far enough from it, by the violence of their affirmations and obstinacy of their belief. But could such dogmatical reasoners become sensible of the strange infirmities of human understanding, even in its most perfect state, and when most accurate and cautious in its determinations; such a reflection would naturally inspire them with more modesty and reserve, and diminish their fond opinion of themselves, and their prejudice against antagonists. The illiterate may reflect on the disposition of the learned, who, amidst all the advantages of study and reflection, are commonly still diffident in their determinations: and if any of the learned be inclined, from their natural temper, to haughtiness and obstinacy, a small tincture of Pyrrhonism might abate their pride, by showing them, that the few advantages, which they may have attained over their fellows, are but inconsiderable, if compared with the universal perplexity and confusion, which is inherent in human nature. In general, there is a degree of doubt, and caution, and modesty, which, in all kinds of scrutiny and decision, ought for ever to accompany a just reasoner.

Hume, *Concerning Human Understanding*, XII, 129

- 28 What danger can ever come from ingenious reasoning and inquiry? The worst speculative skeptic ever I knew was a much better man than the best superstitious devotee and bigot.

Hume, *Letter to Gilbert Elliot* (Mar. 10, 1751)

- 29 Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is an absurd one.

Voltaire, *Letter to Frederick the Great* (Apr. 6, 1767)

- 30 Talking of those who denied the truth of Christianity, he [Johnson] said, "It is always easy to be on the negative side. If a man were now to deny that there is salt upon the table, you could not reduce him to an absurdity. Come, let us try this a little further. I deny that Canada is taken, and I can support my denial by pretty good arguments. The French are a much more numerous people than we; and it is not likely that they would allow us to take it. 'But the ministry have assured us, in all the formality of *The Gazette*, that it is taken.'—Very true. But the ministry have put us to an enormous expence by the war in America, and it is their interest to persuade us that we have got something for our money.—'But the fact is confirmed by thousands of men who were at the taking of it.'—Ay, but these men have still more interest in deceiving us. They don't want that you should think the French have beat them, but that they have beat the French. Now suppose you should go over and find that it is really taken, that would only satisfy yourself; for when you come home we will not believe you. We will say, you have been bribed.—Yet, Sir, notwithstanding all these plausible objections, we have no doubt that Canada is really ours. Such is the weight of common testimony. How much stronger are the evidences of the Christian religion!"

Boswell, *Life of Johnson* (July 14, 1763)

- 31 *Johnson*. "Hume, and other sceptical innovators, are vain men, and will gratify themselves at any expence. Truth will not afford sufficient food to their vanity; so they have betaken themselves to error. Truth, Sir, is a cow which will yield such people no more milk, and so they are gone to milk the bull. If I could have allowed myself to gratify my vanity at the expence of truth, what fame might I have acquired. Every thing which Hume has advanced against Christianity had passed through my mind long before he wrote. Always remember this, that after a system is well settled upon positive evidence, a few partial objections ought not to shake it. The human mind is so limited, that it cannot take in all the parts of a subject, so that there may be objections raised against any thing. There are objections against a *plenum*, and objections against a *vacuum*: yet one of them must certainly be true."

Boswell, *Life of Johnson* (July 21, 1763)



32 After we came out of the church, we stood talking for some time together of Bishop Berkeley's ingenious sophistry to prove the non-existence of matter, and that every thing in the universe is merely ideal. I observed, that though we are satisfied his doctrine is not true, it is impossible to refute it. I never shall forget the alacrity with which Johnson answered, striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it, "I refute it *thus*."

Boswell, *Life of Johnson* (Aug. 6, 1763)

33 When we apply reason to the objective synthesis of phenomena . . . reason establishes, with much plausibility, its principle of unconditioned unity; but it very soon falls into such contradictions that it is compelled, in relation to cosmology, to renounce its pretensions.

For here a new phenomenon of human reason meets us—a perfectly natural antithetic, which does not require to be sought for by subtle sophistry, but into which reason of itself unavoidably falls. It is thereby preserved, to be sure, from the slumber of a fancied conviction—which a merely one-sided illusion produces; but it is at the same time compelled, either, on the one hand, to abandon itself to a despairing scepticism, or, on the other, to assume a dogmatical confidence and obstinate persistence in certain assertions, without granting a fair hearing to the other side of the question. Either is the death of a sound philosophy, although the former might perhaps deserve the title of the euthanasia of pure reason.

Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Transcendental Dialectic

34 The sceptical errors of this remarkably acute thinker [i.e., Hume] arose principally from a defect, which was common to him with the dogmatists, namely, that he had never made a systematic review of all the different kinds of a *priori* synthesis performed by the understanding. Had he done so, he would have found, to take one example among many, that the principle of permanence was of this character, and that it, as well as the principle of causality, anticipates experience. In this way he might have been able to describe the determinate limits of the *a priori* operations of understanding and reason. But he merely declared the understanding to be limited, instead of showing what its limits were; he created a general mistrust in the power of our faculties, without giving us any determinate knowledge of the bounds of our necessary and unavoidable ignorance; he examined and condemned some of the principles of the understanding, without investigating all its powers with the completeness necessary to criticism. He denies, with truth, certain powers to the understanding, but he goes further, and declares it to be utterly inadequate to the *a priori* extension of knowledge, although he has not fully examined

all the powers which reside in the faculty; and thus the fate which always overtakes scepticism meets him too. That is to say, his own declarations are doubted, for his objections were based upon *facta*, which are contingent, and not upon principles, which can alone demonstrate the necessary invalidity of all dogmatical assertions.

Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Transcendental Method

35 He who shall teach the Child to Doubt  
The rotting Grave shall ne'er get out.  
He who respects the Infant's faith  
Triumphs over Hell & Death.

Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*, 87

36 *Mephistopheles*. I am the Spirit that denies!  
And rightly too; for all that doth begin  
Should rightly to destruction run;  
'Twere better then that nothing were begun.

Goethe, *Faust*, I, 1338

37 *Dogmatist*. I'll not let screams lead me to war  
With doubts and critic-cavils.  
The Devil must be something, or  
Else how could there be devils?

*Idealist*. For once, as I see phantasy,

It is far too despotic.

In truth, if I be all I see,

Today I'm idiotic.

*Realist*. This riot makes my torture sheer

And greatly irks me surely;

For the first time I'm standing here

On my feet iusecurely.

*Supernaturalist*. With much delight I join this crew

And share with them their revels;

For that there are good spirits too

I argue from these devils.

*Skeptic*. They go to track the flamelets out

And think they're near the treasure.

Devil alliterates with Doubt,

So I am here with pleasure.

Goethe, *Faust*, I, 4343

38 The arrogant declamations current in our time against philosophy present the singular spectacle, on the one hand of deriving their justification from the superficiality to which that study has been degraded, and, on the other, of being themselves rooted in this element against which they turn so ungratefully. For by pronouncing the knowledge of truth a wild-goose chase, this self-styled philosophizing has reduced all thoughts and all topics to the same level, just as the despotism of the Roman Empire abolished the distinction between free men and slaves, virtue and vice, honour and dishonour, learning and ignorance. The result of this levelling process is that the concepts of what is true, the laws of ethics, likewise become nothing more than opinions and subjec-

tive convictions. The maxims of the worst of criminals, since they too are convictions, are put on the same level of value as those laws; and at the same time any object, however sorry, however accidental, any material however insipid, is put on the same level of value as what constitutes the interest of all thinking men and the bonds of the ethical world.

Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, Pref.

- 39 The most dangerous form of scepticism is always that which least looks like it. The notion that pure thought is the positive truth for an existing individual, is sheer scepticism, for this positiveness is chimerical. It is a glorious thing to be able to explain the past, the whole of human history; but if the ability to understand the past is to be the summit of attainment for a living individual, this positiveness is scepticism, and a dangerous form of it, because of the deceptive quantity of things understood.

Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, II, 3

- 40 I do not press the skepticism of the materialist. I know the quadruped opinion will not prevail. 'Tis of no importance what bats and oxen think. The first dangerous symptom I report is, the levity of intellect; as if it were fatal to earnestness to know much. Knowledge is the knowing that we can not know. The dull pray; the geniuses are light mockers. How respectable is earnestness on every platform! but intellect kills it.

Emerson, *Montaigne; or, The Skeptic*

- 41 I am the doubt and the doubt,  
And I the hymn the Brahmin sings.  
Emerson, *Brahma*

- 42 You say, but with no touch of scorn,  
Sweet-hearted, you, whose light-blue eyes  
Are tender over drowning flies,  
You tell me, doubt is Devil-boru.

I know not: one indeed I knew  
In many a subtle question versed,  
Who touch'd a jarring lyre at first,  
But ever strove to make it true;

Perplext in faith, but pure in deeds,  
At last he beat his music out.  
There lives more faith in honest doubt,  
Believe me, than in half the creeds.

He fought his doubts and gather'd strength,  
He would not make his judgment blind,  
He faced the spectres of the mind  
And laid them; thus he came at length

To find a stronger faith his own,  
And Power was with him in the night,  
Which makes the darkness and the light,  
And dwells not in the light alone,

But in the darkness and the cloud,  
As over Sinai's peaks of old,  
While Israel made their gods of gold,  
Altho' the trumpet blew so loud.

Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, XCVI

- 43 Know ye, now, Bulkington? Glimpses do ye seem to see of that mortally intolerable truth; that all deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore?

But as in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God—so, better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety! For worm-like, then, oh! who would craven crawl to land! Terrors of the terrible! is all this agony so vain? Take heart, take heart, O Bulkington! Bear thee grimly, demigod! Up from the spray of thy ocean-perishing—straight up, leaps thy apotheosis!

Melville, *Moby Dick*, XXIII

- 44 Through all the thick mists of the dim doubts in my mind, divine intuitions now and then shoot, enkindling my fog with a heavenly ray. And for this I thank God; for all have doubts; many deny; but doubts or denials, few along with them, have intuitions. Doubts of all things earthly, and intuitions of some things heavenly; this combination makes neither believer nor infidel, but makes a man who regards them both with equal eye.

Melville, *Moby Dick*, LXXXV

- 45 Those who were more directly responsible for providing me with the knowledge essential to the right guidance of life (and who sincerely desired to do so), imagined they were discharging that most sacred duty by impressing upon my childish mind the necessity, on pain of reprobation in this world and damnation in the next, of accepting, in the strict and literal sense, every statement contained in the Protestant Bible. I was told to believe, and I did believe, that doubt about any of them was a sin, not less reprehensible than a moral delict. I suppose that, out of a thousand of my contemporaries, nine hundred, at least, had their minds systematically warped and poisoned, in the name of the God of truth, by like discipline.

T. H. Huxley, *Science and Christian Tradition*, Prologue

- 46 Why not, "The Way, the Truth, the Life?"

That way  
Over the mountain, which who stands upon  
Is apt to doubt if it be meant for a road;  
While, if he views it from the waste itself,  
Up goes the line there, plain from base to brow,  
Not vague, mistakable! what's a break or two

Seen from the unbroken desert either side?  
 And then (to bring in fresh philosophy)  
 What if the breaks themselves should prove at last  
 The most consummate of contrivances  
 To train a man's eye, teach him what is faith?  
 And so we stumble at truth's very test!  
 All we have gained then by our unbelief  
 Is a life of doubt diversified by faith,  
 For one of faith diversified by doubt:  
 We called the chess-board white,—we call it  
 black.

Browning, *Bishop Blougram's Apology*

- 47 Philosophers of very diverse stripes propose that philosophy shall take its start from one or another state of mind in which no man, least of all a beginner in philosophy, actually is. One proposes that you shall begin by doubting everything, and says that there is only one thing that you cannot doubt, as if doubting were "as easy as lying." Another proposes that we should begin by observing "the first impressions of sense," forgetting that our very percepts are the results of cognitive elaboration. But in truth, there is but one state of mind from which you can "set out," namely, the very state of mind in which you actually find yourself at the time you do "set out"—a state in which you are laden with an immense mass of cognition already formed, of which you cannot divest yourself if you would; and who knows whether, if you could, you would not have made all knowledge impossible to yourself? Do you call it *doubting* to write down on a piece of paper that you doubt? If so, doubt has nothing to do with any serious business. But do not make believe; if pedantry has not eaten all the reality out of you, recognize, as you must, that there is much that you do not doubt, in the least. Now that which you do not at all doubt, you must and do regard as infallible, absolute truth. . . .

Two things here are all-important to assure oneself of and to remember. The first is that a person is not absolutely an individual. His thoughts are what he is "saying to himself," that is, is saying to that other self that is just coming into life in the flow of time. When one reasons, it is that critical self that one is trying to persuade; and all thought whatsoever is a sign, and is mostly of the nature of language. The second thing to remember is that the man's circle of society (however widely or narrowly this phrase may be understood), is a sort of loosely compacted person, in some respects of higher rank than the person of an individual organism. It is these two things alone that render it possible for you—but only in the abstract, and in a Pickwickian sense—to distinguish between absolute truth and what you do not doubt.

C. S. Peirce, *What Pragmatism Means*

- 48 Our belief in truth itself . . . that there is a truth,

and that our minds and it are made for each other,—what is it but a passionate affirmation of desire, in which our social system backs us up? We want to have a truth; we want to believe that our experiments and studies and discussions must put us in a continually better and better position towards it; and on this line we agree to fight out our thinking lives. But if a pyrrhonic sceptic asks us *how we know* all this, can our logic find a reply? No! certainly it cannot. It is just one volition against another,—we willing to go in for life upon a trust or assumption which he, for his part, does not care to make.

William James, *Will to Believe*

- 49 Neither acquiescence in skepticism nor acquiescence in dogma is what education should produce. What it should produce is a belief that knowledge is attainable in a measure, though with difficulty; that much of what passes for knowledge at any given time is likely to be more or less mistaken, but that the mistakes can be rectified by care and industry. . . . Knowledge, like other good things, is difficult, but not impossible; the dogmatist forgets the difficulty, the skeptic denies the possibility. Both are mistaken, and their errors, when widespread, produce social disaster.

Russell, *Aims of Education*

- 50 I wish to propose for the reader's favourable consideration a doctrine which may, I fear, appear wildly paradoxical and subversive. The doctrine in question is this: that it is undesirable to believe a proposition when there is no ground whatever for supposing it true. I must, of course, admit that if such an opinion became common it would completely transform our social life and our political system; since both are at present faultless, this must weigh against it. I am also aware (what is more serious) that it would tend to diminish the incomes of clairvoyants, bookmakers, bishops and others who live on the irrational hopes of those who have done nothing to deserve good fortune here or hereafter. In spite of these grave arguments, I maintain that a case can be made out for my paradox.

Russell, *Sceptical Essays*, I

- 51 If one regards oneself as a sceptic, it is well from time to time to be sceptical about one's scepticism.

Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, XXX

- 52 The *Weltanschauung* to which I shall first refer is, as it were, a counterpart of political anarchism, and may perhaps have emanated from it. No doubt there have been intellectual nihilists of this kind before, but at the present day the theory of relativity of modern physics seems to have gone to their heads. It is true that they start out from science, but they succeed in forcing it to cut the

ground from under its own feet, to commit suicide, as it were; they make it dispose of itself by getting it to refute its own premises. One often has an impression that this nihilism is only a temporary attitude, which will only be kept up until this task has been completed. When once science has been got rid of, some kind of mysticism, or, indeed, the old religious *Weltanschauung*, can spring up in the space that has been left vacant. According to this anarchistic doctrine, there is no such thing as truth, no assured knowledge of the external world. What we give out as scientific truth is only the product of our own needs and desires, as they are formulated under varying external conditions; that is to say, it is illusion once more. Ultimately we find only what we need to find, and see only what we desire to see. We can do nothing else. And since the criterion of truth, correspondence with an external world, disappears, it is absolutely immaterial what views we accept. All of them are equally true and false. And no one has a right to accuse any one else of error.

For a mind which is interested in epistemology, it would be tempting to enquire into the contrivances and sophistries by means of which the anarchists manage to elicit a final product of this kind from science. One would no doubt be brought up against situations like the one involved in the familiar example of the Cretan who says that all Cretans are liars. But I am not desirous, nor am I capable, of going deeper into this. I will merely remark that the anarchistic theory only retains its remarkable air of superiority so long as it is concerned with opinions about abstract things; it breaks down the moment it comes in contact with practical life. Now the behaviour of men is guided by their opinions and knowledge, and the same scientific spirit which speculates about the structure of the atom or the origin of man is concerned in the building of a bridge that will bear its load. If it were really a matter of indifference what we believed, if there were no knowledge which was distinguished from among our opinions by the fact that it corresponds with reality, then we might just as well build our bridges of cardboard as of stone, or inject a tenth of a gramme of morphia into a patient instead of a hundredth, or take tear-gas as a narcotic instead of ether. But the intellectual anarchists themselves would strongly repudiate such practical applications of their theory.

Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, XXXV

- 53 For an answer which cannot be expressed the question too cannot be expressed.

*The riddle does not exist.*

If a question can be put at all, then it *can* also be answered.

Scepticism is *not* irrefutable, but palpably senseless, if it would doubt where a question cannot be asked.

For doubt can only exist where there is a question; a question only where there is an answer, and this only where something can be said.

We feel that even if *all possible* scientific questions be answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all. Of course there is then no question left, and just this is the answer.

The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of this problem.

(Is not this the reason why men to whom after long doubting the sense of life became clear, could not then say wherein this sense consisted?)

Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.5–6.521

- 54 Scepticism is the chastity of the intellect, and it is shameful to surrender it too soon or to the first comer: there is nobility in preserving it coolly and proudly through a long youth, until at last, in the ripeness of instinct and discretion, it can be safely exchanged for fidelity and happiness.

Santayana, *Scepticism and Animal Faith*, IX

- 55 Was the being of truth . . . denied by the Sophists, or could they deny it? Yes, if we think only of the truth as proclaimed by particular opinions. All things *said* to be true might be false. Whatsoever depended on argument might be challenged by an opposed cleverer argument; whatsoever depended on usage, faith, or preference might be reversed by a contrary pose; so that every man remained free to think and do what he liked, and to deny all authority. This, though with a different moral tone and intention, was also the position of the Sceptics. They despised opinion, and collected contradictory arguments in order to liberate the mind from every pledge and the heart from every earthly bond. These indomitable doubters stood firm as rocks in their philosophy; and even the Sophists were sure of their wisdom and knowingness in playing their chosen parts in the world. For both schools, then, there was an *unspoken truth*: namely, that life was a treacherous predicament in which they found themselves without a reason, and that they were determined, whether nobly or nimbly, to make the best of it. Their moral philosophy left the cosmos problematical, while taking for granted abundant knowledge of human affairs and human character. If that age had had a turn for introspection and autobiography, it might have erected a doctrine of the march of experience. Trust in memory, in expectation, in the mutual communication of many minds might have issued in a system like modern psychologism: the view that all we see, say, and think is false, but that the only truth is that we see, say and think it. If nothing be real except experience, nothing can be true except biography. Society must then be conceived as carried on in a literary medium, with no regard to the natural basis of society. If the ancients never

hit upon such a system of biographical metaphysics, the reason doubtless was that they were too intelligent.

Santayana, *Realm of Truth*, XIII

56 As for the sceptics, who doubt, as least theoretically and in words, the reliability of our organs of knowledge, especially of the intellect or reason, it would obviously be waste of breath to attempt to demonstrate its reliability to them. For every demonstration rests on some previously admitted certainty, and it is their very profession to admit of none. To defend human knowledge against their attack it is sufficient (i) to show in what that knowledge consists and how it is attained; (ii) to refute the arguments they adduce; (iii) to make a *reductio ad absurdum*. When they say that they do

not know whether any proposition is true, either they know that this proposition at any rate is true, in which case they obviously contradict themselves, or they do not know whether it is true, in which case they are either saying nothing whatever, or do not know what they say. The sole philosophy open to those who doubt the possibility of truth is absolute silence—even mental. That is to say, as Aristotle points out, such men must make themselves vegetables. No doubt reason often errs, especially in the highest matters, and, as Cicero said long ago, there is no nonsense in the world which has not found some philosopher to maintain it, so difficult is it to attain truth. But it is the error of cowards to mistake a difficulty for an impossibility.

Maritain, *Introduction to Philosophy*, II, 4