Skepticism

Skepticism is one of the most enduring and profound of philosophical problems. With roots from Plato and the Skeptics to Descartes, Hume, Kant, and Wittgenstein, skepticism presents a challenge that every philosopher must reckon with. In this outstanding collection, philosophers engage with skepticism in five clear sections: the philosophical history of skepticism in Greek, Humean, and post-Kantian thought; the nature and limits of certainty; the possibility of knowledge and related problems, such as perception and debates about rule-following and objectivity; the transcendental method as a response to skepticism; and overcoming the skeptical challenge.

*Skepticism: Historical and Contemporary Inquiries* is essential reading for students and scholars in epistemology and the history of philosophy and will also be of interest to those in related disciplines, such as religion and sociology.

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Skepticism
Historical and Contemporary Inquiries

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Skepticism is the inescapable provocation to reconsider arguments, reassess commitments, acknowledge ignorance, and confess prejudice. As such, it is a ubiquitous inspiration for philosophical reflection and innovation. The common theme uniting the essays in this collection is the necessity, shared by philosophers of all stripes, of taking seriously the various threats facing historical and contemporary positions in metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics, and confronting the philosophical vocation more generally. Regardless of her sympathies or sub-discipline, no philosopher has advanced her position, improved the terms of the debates in which she participates, or contributed to the resolution of longstanding problems by simply dismissing or ignoring such threats. It is a continual rite of passage for success in these endeavors to anticipate, refute, or defang the skeptic embodied by her interlocutor or, perhaps, by herself. It further has the critical virtue of keeping her honest. Our contributors draw attention, in their respective ways, to the philosophical prerequisites of humility, diligence, and imagination in response to skeptical challenges. Emerging from the diversity of the standpoints taken in this volume is a shared sensitivity to skepticism’s plausibility and to the risk we run in numbing ourselves to its force.

Skepticism’s persistent salience for philosophical thought is reflected in the five parts of this collection. The first part—“Forms of Skepticism”—introduces the reader to different ways in which skepticism can present itself. The next three parts—“Skepticism and Certainty”, “Skepticism and Knowledge”, and “Skepticism and Transcendental Method”—take the reader through three focused topics of longstanding philosophical importance. The fifth and final part—“Anti-Skeptical Strategies”—provides the reader with different contemporary ways approaches to overcoming genuine skeptical threats.

The volume’s first part concerns some of the key manifestations of skepticism throughout the history of philosophy. Michael Forster delineates the cultural and literary sources of skepticism in ancient Greek culture, indicating its origin in and significance for non-academic aspects of social life. Donald Ainslie articulates Hume’s ‘true’ skepticism as a response to maladies arising from philosophical doubt, which consists of humility in
the face of cognitive and justificatory limitations. Brady Bowman provides an analysis of the relationship between freedom and skepticism in post-Kantian philosophy, focusing on one of the most contested matters for skeptic and philosopher alike: namely, the value of knowledge. By portraying some of the broader varieties of skepticism, the collection opens the reader to different pathways into philosophical thinking.

The second part focuses on a foundational confrontation with skepticism, namely, the nature and limits of certainty. In a commentary on “Facts and Certainty”, Crispin Wright (reprinted in this collection) reassesses his claims in light of later developments in his thought, distinguishing problematic appeals to cognitive certainty regarding structurally basic truths—appeals that perennially invite skeptical doubt—from weaker and comparatively unproblematic claims to epistemic warrant concerning the same. Casey Perin investigates whether, and in what respect, the state of mind that Sextus Empiricus attributes to skepticism can be characterized as agnostic. This part of the volume serves to show how challenges to certainty help to shape more modest views about what we do when making truth claims, holding beliefs, and taking up action.

The third part of the volume concerns challenges to the possibility of knowledge as such and of specific kinds of knowledge. Martin Pickavé examines medieval discussions concerning whether certain knowledge is possible and whether knowable things include substances, two debates that exert enormous influence on early modern investigations into knowledge. Hannah Ginsborg interprets Kripke’s skeptical argument that there is no such thing as meaning as epistemological, against its commonly metaphysical interpretation, in order to avoid the pitfalls of metaphysical responses to the argument and to secure a stronger objection to it. Sebastian Rödl resolves the skeptical dilemma that knowledge is objective if factually correct, yet subjective if available to a thinker, by arguing that objective knowledge is constituted by self-consciousness, thereby undermining appeals to external realism and constructivism alike.

The fourth part examines Kant’s transcendental method as a response to skepticism. Andrea Kern defends a way of blocking the infinite regress threatened by the skeptical thought that, in order to exercise the capacity for knowledge, one must know that one possesses that capacity, which itself requires the exercise of the capacity for knowledge. G. Anthony Bruno offers an account of the role that critical skepticism plays in the transcendental deduction of the categories of the understanding, arguing that deferred trust in our cognitive faculty is pivotal for reason’s maturation as Kant conceives it and as Hegel subsequently redefines it in his science of the experience of consciousness.

After covering the problems of certainty, knowledge, and transcendental method, the volume’s fifth part presents readers with different contemporary ways of philosophically overcoming skepticism. Duncan Pritchard addresses the question of what makes Wittgenstein’s position anti-skeptical
by distinguishing the skeptical threats that Wittgenstein takes seriously and seeks to overcome from those that he simply dismisses. Finally, Markus Gabriel argues that skepticism about knowledge as such presupposes an illegitimate metaphysical conception of the world, whose abandonment reveals our ways of knowing to be contextual, fallible, and non-unified.

Our collection does not aim for historical or thematic comprehensiveness, but rather is intended to juxtapose the work of a variety of thinkers affected equally by the challenges of skepticism. This approach allows for and encourages scholars of different philosophical sub-disciplines to interact in ways not fostered by more historically focused or more thematically specific anthologies on skepticism. We hope that readers will find these essays individually insightful and mutually illuminating.
Part I

Forms of skepticism
One of the most striking features of ancient Greek philosophy, and indeed of ancient Greek culture more generally, is a development of various forms of skepticism (in a broad sense of the term). This feature distinguishes ancient Greek philosophy and culture from the ancient Egyptian and Near Eastern sources which may well have stimulated the earliest emergence of philosophy in Greece.

It seems to me that this feature of Greek philosophy and culture can to a significant extent be traced back to Homer (in the loose sense of the author(s) of the Iliad and the Odyssey, whoever he was or they were) and his culture. Accordingly, in this article I would like to discuss the beginnings of two very different forms of skepticism in Homer: what I shall call philosophical skepticism and literary skepticism respectively.

I. Philosophical skepticism

A casual survey of the works that survive from the archaic period of ancient Greece (roughly, the eighth to seventh centuries BC) might give the impression that the culture of that period lacked any clear epistemology, any clear theory of knowledge, at all. It might then seem attractive to infer from that supposed fact that it was in considerable part just for this reason that the Greeks were vulnerable to skepticism. However, I want to propose a quite contrary picture: that the culture of the archaic period, as reflected in the poets Homer and Hesiod, in fact had a rather clear epistemology, and that, ironically, the culture was set up for skepticism (was a skepticism ‘just waiting to happen,’ as it were) precisely because it had the epistemology in question—in other words, that it would have been much less vulnerable to skepticism had it possessed no epistemology at all, but instead merely made claims about this and that without having any general theory concerning how the information involved was known.

Let us begin by considering the archaic epistemology in question, as it occurs in Homer and Hesiod. It consisted of two broad principles:
1. Human beings can attain some knowledge by means of human powers alone, but only concerning matters of which either they themselves or their more or less immediate acquaintances (who can serve them as witnesses) have personally had sense-experience. Accordingly, the epics of Homer are full of narratives of everyday episodes in which people know things based on their own sense-experience: who this warrior is, what that weapon is, and so on (though such judgments are not infallible—for example, the Trojans famously mistake Patroclus for Achilles—they are usually reliable). And concerning knowledge via one’s acquaintances, on occasion this can even extend as far as it does at *Iliad*, xx, 203–5, where Aeneas says to Achilles: “We know each other’s lineage and parents, hearing the words of mortal men which have been handed on successively by word of mouth.”

2. However, this still leaves a vast domain concerning which human beings cannot achieve knowledge through their own powers alone—including, in particular, the future (recall that there was no predictive science to speak of at this period); the past insofar as it extends beyond one’s own experience and that of one’s acquaintances (recall that there was little or no writing, record-keeping, historiography, or archaeology at this period); and the non-sensible sphere, i.e., the sphere of the Olympian gods in their normal non-sensible forms (this time in all three temporal modalities: past, present, and future). In order to know anything about any of these matters, human beings are entirely dependent on inspiration by the gods. For example, in a fairly clear and comprehensive illustration of this picture, near the beginning of the *Iliad* Homer says of the divinely inspired prophet Calchas that he “had knowledge of all things that were, and that were to be, and that had been before,” and he then shows Calchas communicating information about Apollo’s present purposes (*Iliad*, i, 69–100). And concerning knowledge of the remote past specifically, Homer again early in the *Iliad* calls on the Muses to provide him with such knowledge, namely a list of the contingents of the Greeks who went to Troy in ancient times, saying,

Tell me now, ye Muses that have dwellings on Olympus—for ye are goddesses and are at hand and know all things, whereas we hear but a rumour and know not anything—who were the captains of the Danaans and their lords.

(*Iliad*, ii, 484–7)

In another reasonably clear and comprehensive attribution of a grasp of these several types of knowledge to inspiration by the gods, Hesiod says at the start of the *Theogony* that the Muses “breathed into me a divine voice to celebrate things that shall be and things that were afore-time; and they bade me sing of the race of the blessed gods that are
eternally” (Theogony, 31–3). According to this whole archaic conception, the specific sources and channels of such divine inspiration were quite diverse (including, besides the Muses with their poets, and Apollo with prophets such as Calchas, also divinely determined bird flight and other animal behavior, divinely caused meteorological phenomena such as lightning, divinely inspired dreams, oracles, and so on). But the crucial point is that, according to this archaic conception, where questions about the future, the remote past, or the Olympian gods are concerned, human beings, unless they enjoy divine inspiration through one or another of these sources and channels, “hear but a rumour and know not anything” (Iliad, ii, 486).11

Now, concerning the irony I mentioned earlier, the essential point to note is that precisely because the archaic period had this simple two-part epistemology covering all domains of knowledge, only two moves were required in order to plunge archaic culture into complete skepticism: (1) an undermining of faith in the reliability of sense-experience as a source of knowledge, and (2) an undermining of faith in the reliability of divine inspiration as a source of knowledge. In other words, in order to generate a complete skepticism there was no need to launch an attack on people’s myriad individual claims to knowledge or types of knowledge severally, which would have been an enormous and difficult, if not impossible, task; simply by attacking the two supports in question, the whole edifice of knowledge could be brought down.

It seems to me that both of these two moves were in fact made by presocratic philosophy, with the result that skepticism henceforth became a very natural option for Greek philosophy and culture. And it seems to me that the first person to make both moves, and to advocate a sort of global skepticism, was Xenophanes (who flourished around 530 BC).

Let us consider the two moves in question in reverse order, i.e., beginning with move (2): the undermining of faith in knowledge based on divine inspiration. Xenophanes rejected the traditional religion of Homer and Hesiod in a very radical and sweeping way. He rejected its anthropomorphism (frr. 14–16, 23), including its conception that the gods are born and have bodies, speech, and clothes, as humans do (fr. 14), and its conception that they indulge in such vices as theft, adultery, and deception, as humans do (frr. 11–12). An especially interesting part of his case here was an observation that different peoples conceive the gods in incompatible ways and in accordance with their own distinctive features—for example, that the Ethiopians conceive them as snub-nosed and black, but the Thracians as blue-eyed and red-haired (fr. 16)—and an inference from this that if animals such as cattle, horses, and lions were to represent gods, they would do the same (fr. 15). Moreover, he even rejected traditional religion’s polytheism, instead holding that there is only one god, a god who is quite unlike human beings: “One god, greatest among gods and men, in no way similar
to mortals either in body or in thought” (fr. 23; cf. fragments like 32, A40, and A43 in which Xenophanes explains away traditional gods such as Iris, the Sun, and the Moon as clouds, thereby implying that they are not really gods at all). And in yet another departure from it, he held that this single god remains unmov- ing in the same place (fr. 26) and causes motion by the power of thought alone (fr. 25).

For our purposes here, though, the most crucial aspect of Xenophanes’ rejection of traditional religion is that he repudiated the archaic view that the gods communicate knowledge to human beings through poetry, prophecy, and so on. This interpretation is controversial, so let me support it with some evidence (roughly in order of increasing strength): (i) Nowhere in the extant fragments does Xenophanes endorse that archaic view. (ii) He reproaches its paradigmatic representatives, Homer and Hesiod, for falsehood (fr. 11). (iii) He explicitly denies divinity to one of the gods who was traditionally most associated with the function of serving as a messenger between gods and humans, namely Iris: “And she whom they call Iris, she too is actually a cloud” (fr. 32). (iv) Moreover, as a monotheist who similar-ly explains away virtually all of the other traditional gods in naturalistic terms (see above), he explicitly eliminates virtually all of the remaining traditional sources of divine inspiration as well. (v) Most tellingly of all, he explicitly denies that the gods have communicated their omniscience to humans, saying that humans are instead reliant on themselves for improving their grasp of the world: “Yet the gods have not revealed all things to mortals from the beginning, but by seeking men find out better in time” (fr. 18). In short, Xenophanes made move (2).

Let us turn now to move (1): the undermining of faith in the reliability of sense-experience. It has often been argued by the modern secondary literature that Xenophanes’ skepticism did not extend to claims based on sense-experience. However, the balance of the evidence strongly suggests that it did. For one thing, a whole string of ancient authorities, who prob-ably had considerably more evidence to draw on than we do—including pseudo-Plutarch, Aristocles, Aëtius, Sotion, and Sextus Empiricus—unanimously assert or imply that it did. For another thing, evidence for this reading can also be found in the extant fragments of Xenophanes themselves. Thus, in one fragment he seems to be offering an argument for skepticism concerning judgments about the sweetness of foodstuffs: “If gods had not created yellow honey, they [i.e., people] would say that figs were far sweeter” (fr. 38). And in another fragment he seems to register a measure of skeptical detachment even about his own age at the time of his exile from his native city of Colophon to a life of wandering, saying that he was 25 “if indeed I am able to tell correctly of these matters” (fr. 8).

James Lesher has objected to this sort of interpretation of Xenophanes’ position that a number of passages seem to speak against it. For example, in one fragment Xenophanes refers to the upper limit of the earth that is seen here at our feet” (B28), and in another he encourages people
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to “observe” the multi-colored rainbow (B32). However, I think that this problem has a solution. The solution can be seen from Xenophanes’ remark at fr. 8 concerning his own age—“if indeed I am able to tell correctly of these matters”—and from his injunction in another fragment, “Let these things be opined as resembling the truth” (fr. 35). It is that although Xenophanes really is skeptical that he knows about such sensory matters, he nonetheless takes his impressions concerning them seriously—in a way that he does not take the supposed deliverances of divine inspiration seriously, for example. Such a combination of global skepticism about both the deliverances of divine inspiration (or reason) and the deliverances of the senses with a certain privileging of the latter over the former will later be characteristic of Pyrrhonian skepticism as well (consider, for instance, Sextus Empiricus’s account of the Pyrrhonist’s life of appearances in the Outlines of Pyrrhonism). Moreover, when one recalls that the de facto founder of Pyrrhonism, Timon, is known to have admired and imitated Xenophanes, it seems likely that Xenophanes was the source of that position in Pyrrhonism.21 (This is only one of several important debts that Pyrrhonism probably owes to Xenophanes via Timon. Others include the global renunciation of claims to knowledge; the model of proper inquiry as seeking, zêtein; calling on opposed appearances in order to undermine belief; and use of the specific example of not being able to tell due to opposed appearances whether or not honey is sweet.)

In short, Xenophanes not only took step (2), but also step (1) (undermining faith in the reliability of sense-experience).22

Having thus effectively cut off both of the two archaic routes to knowledge, Xenophanes found himself driven, with remarkable consistency, to a quite general skepticism. This is shown by his most famous skeptical fragment of all:

And as for certain truth, no man has seen it, nor will there ever be a man who knows about the gods and about all the things I mention. For even if he succeeds to the fullest in saying what is completely true, he himself nevertheless fails to know it; and opinion/seeming [dokos] is wrought over all things.

(fr. 34)23

In sum, surprisingly enough, archaic culture already had a certain rather clear, albeit simple, epistemology. Moreover, ironically enough, it was set up for a skeptical fall precisely because it did so (it would have been less vulnerable to skepticism if it had had no epistemology at all). By about the last third of the sixth century BC the two assumptions that had made knowledge possible according to this simple epistemology—the assumption of the availability of divine inspiration concerning the future, the unexperienced past, and the non-sensible; and the assumption of the normal reliability of sensory experience—had both been undermined, leading to a global
skepticism. The person who took these steps was Xenophanes. By doing so he anticipated and strongly influenced the development of philosophical skepticism in the subsequent Greek tradition.

II. Literary skepticism

Among the various forms of skepticism (in a broad sense) that the Greeks developed the earliest, however, was what one might call literary skepticism. By this I do not mean a type of skepticism that was less intellectually serious than philosophical skepticism or that was about literature (at least not essentially), but instead a type of skepticism that was more or less exclusively developed by literature, albeit that it still had a broadly philosophical character. (It is perhaps worth noting in this connection that ancient literature—Homer already, but then especially tragedy—quite often contains ideas of a broadly philosophical character, as it does here.) This form of skepticism consists, roughly, in a concern that over and above the threat to human knowledge that is posed by routine human error, including error resulting from deliberate deception by other human beings, there is an even greater threat to human knowledge: human beings may be deliberately deceived in important ways by the gods, and moreover often to their great harm.

As far as one can judge from the available evidence, Homer is the earliest representative of this form of skepticism. *Iliad*, Book 2 is a locus classicus for it. For we there encounter not only examples of human error in general, including human error due to human deception—for instance, the Greek forces’ erroneous belief that they are about to go back to Greece, which is caused by Agamemnon’s deliberate deception of them to this effect (in order to test them) (*Iliad*, ii, 73–154)—but also a striking example of the gods deliberately deceiving human beings, and moreover thereby harming them. Having already in Book 1 agreed to accord Achilles’ mother Thetis her and her son Achilles’ wish that the Greeks be driven back from Troy in order to punish Agamemnon for his insults to Achilles, Zeus now in Book 2 prepares the ground for this punishment by sending to Agamemnon a (personified) deceptive dream, who tells him falsely that if he attacks Troy on that day he will take it (a deception that eventually does indeed lead to the Greeks being beaten back, just as Achilles and Thetis had requested) (*Iliad*, ii, 1–40). Nor is this by any means an isolated example of the sort of skeptical concern in question in Homer. For instance, in the very next book of the *Iliad*, Book 3, we encounter another striking example of it when Helen, told by a thinly disguised Aphrodite to go to Paris in their bedroom, fears that the goddess is trying to deceive her, and in particular to trick her into still further humiliating wanderings away from home (*Iliad*, iii, 390–405). Moreover, additional examples follow soon afterwards in Books 4 and 5.

This sort of skeptical worry continues to play an important role a few centuries later in Greek tragedy as well. For example, in Sophocles’ *Ajax*,
after Ajax has been cheated of the arms of Achilles by the two Atreidae and Odysseus and has conceived the plan of attacking them in revenge, Athena, both in order to avenge a slight to her that Ajax has committed and in order to help her protégé Odysseus, intervenes to frustrate Ajax's plan by deluding him into believing that the Greeks' cattle and sheep are his human enemies, so that he attacks them instead, a delusion which then leads to his deep shame and eventual suicide. And Euripides in his _Helen_ develops a reworking of the Homeric story of Helen along novel lines that had already been explored by Stesichorus, according to which Hera punishes Paris for his preference of Aphrodite over her in a contest for beauty by substituting an illusory Helen for the real one whom he has taken from Greece and sending the real one to Egypt, a deception that afflicts not only Paris himself, but also the other Trojans and the Greeks, all of whom are caused by it to undergo great and pointless suffering.

This general theme of deliberate divine deception of human beings to their harm also undergoes some interesting variations in the literary tradition. For example, already in Hesiod we find a variation according to which the divine Muses (and consequently in a way also the human poets whom they inspire) sometimes deceive. Thus in the _Theogony_ Hesiod reports that the Muses whom he encountered on Mount Helicon said, "we know how to speak many false things as though they were true; but we know, when we will, to utter true things" (_Theogony_, 27–8).

And perhaps the most extraordinary variation of all occurs in Sophocles' _Oedipus Rex_. There the theme of gods deliberately deceiving human beings and thereby harming them remains fundamental. But this theme is varied in some unusual and fascinating ways: For one thing, the main instruments of the deception are certain oracles that are actually true—specifically, the oracle to Laius that he will be killed by his son, and the oracle to Oedipus that he will kill his father and sleep with his mother. The deceptiveness lies not in the oracles' falsehood, but instead in the fact that they are communicated in such a context and in such a manner that they inevitably lead their recipients into misunderstandings and errors that bring about the oracles' fulfillment and thereby the recipients' downfall. Thus Laius in reaction to the oracle that _he_ receives orders that his infant son Oedipus be killed, which in fact leads to Oedipus being spared by a compassionate servant charged with the task and given away to Corinth, whence he eventually returns to Thebes and does indeed kill Laius. And similarly, Oedipus, when he receives _his_ oracle in Corinth, assumes that it is referring to the royal couple there who, unbeknownst to him, adopted him in his infancy and are therefore merely his adoptive parents, and consequently reacts by leaving Corinth for Thebes in order to avoid killing/sleeping with them, which eventually leads to him killing his natural father and sleeping with his natural mother in Thebes. For another thing, Oedipus is an unusually intelligent man, in particular a man who has solved the riddle of the Sphinx and thereby won the throne of Thebes. These two unusual features of the
Oedipus Rex together generate a particularly frightening version of the sort of skeptical concern in question: showing both that the gods’ deception can take endlessly devious, sophisticated, and ironic forms, and that even the most intelligent of human beings can be tricked and brought down by it.

Literary skepticism is interestingly different from the various forms of philosophical skepticism that arose in antiquity—for example, in Xenophanes, Parmenides, Protagoras, Socrates, the Pyrrhonists, and the Academic skeptics. It is so not only in its source (literature rather than philosophy), but also in its character. For one thing, whereas philosophical skepticism is usually broad or even unrestricted in scope, literary skepticism is normally more limited in scope, concerned just with certain people on certain occasions and in relation to certain topics. For another thing, whereas philosophical skepticism employs special types of argument in order to motivate its doubts and denials—for instance, Parmenides’ paradox of not-being and its various applications, Socrates’ elenchus, or the Pyrrhonists’ method of equipollence—literary skepticism does not (unless merely adducing the phenomenon of deception by very clever and powerful gods is itself to be counted as a special type of argument). For yet another thing, whereas philosophical skepticism does not envisage any deliberate deception of human beings, literary skepticism does. Nonetheless, literary skepticism remains philosophical in character in a broad sense of the term.

After flourishing in the tragedy of the fifth century BC, literary skepticism seems to have almost died out by the fourth century BC. This was probably due in part to the widespread displacement of traditional conceptions of the gods by either outright agnosticism/atheism (think of Protagoras, Critias, and others) or else, more commonly, the sort of less anthropocentric, more abstract conceptions of god(s) that philosophers such as Xenophanes had introduced. It was probably also due in part to the sort of attack on the conception that gods lie or deceive that can already be found in Xenophanes and which recurs later in Plato’s Republic (an attack that in turn drew on a growth of a more general moral aversion to lying and deception that occurred in the sixth and fifth centuries BC). 24

However, literary skepticism subsequently re-emerged in the form of a late after-echo with Christianity. For within Christianity a variant of it occurs, not indeed in relation to God as before, but instead in relation to the devil and his minions, who are similarly believed to deceive human beings deliberately and thereby cause their downfall. (In order to perceive the continuity here, it may help to note that the New Testament’s word for a demon, daimôn, had originally been the pagan Greeks’ most generic word for a god.) Descartes subsequently drew on this Christian after-echo, in the form of his malin génie, in the first Meditation in order to formulate his own version of skepticism.

Now, unlike philosophical skepticism, which clearly remains a live topic for us today, literary skepticism might seem at first sight to have been completely superseded these days and to have no more than historical interest
for us, since we no longer believe in gods (at least if we are well-informed and sensible), let alone in deceptive or malicious ones. However, I want to suggest that, on the contrary, a closely analogous type of skepticism should still trouble us today. For we should still be very worried that the world contains—if not exactly superhuman beings with purposes, then at least—superhuman or superindividual mechanisms that have a quasi-purposive, namely a functional, character, and which cause human beings to hold erroneous beliefs, often to their harm.

Let me, therefore, in the hope of recuperating a version of literary skepticism for modern philosophy, try to sketch a case for this sort of skeptical worry. I shall do so in three parts: (1) the erroneous beliefs, (2) the functional mechanisms, and (3) the harm.

1 The erroneous beliefs. It seems plausible to say not merely that human beings sometimes commit errors but that most human beings commit serious errors most of the time. For this seems to be an implication of the discrepancy between what Wilfrid Sellars has called the “manifest image” of everyday beliefs and the “scientific image” of the (natural) sciences. Some examples of the errors involved would be: belief in gods or a God; relatively, belief in an afterlife; relatively again, belief in myths about the gods/God and about an afterlife (for example, pagan Greek myths or the equally fanciful myths of the three Abrahamic religions); relatively again, much of theology and metaphysics; relatively again, belief in the purposiveness of much of non-human nature (discredited since Kant and Darwin); belief that the earth is the center of the universe (discredited since Copernicus); belief that heavenly bodies in general are rather small (likewise discredited by modern astronomy); belief in the solidity of macrophysical objects (discredited by modern physics in light of the wide spacing of the particles that constitute them, as Bertrand Russell noted); belief in the objectivity of secondary qualities, such as colors, smells, and tastes (again, discredited by modern physics); belief in the objectivity of moral and aesthetic qualities (more plausibly seen as subject-dependent in a manner similar to secondary qualities, as Hume argued); belief that our conscious intentions are the real causes of our actions (plausibly called into question by the experiments of Benjamin Libbet, which seem to show that brain events that occur shortly before conscious intentions are the real causes of actions); belief in some sort of objective superiority of one’s own nation over other nations; belief in some sort of objective superiority of the individual human beings one loves, especially one’s partner and one’s children, over other human beings; belief in some sort of objective superiority of human beings over (other) animals; and belief in various fictions that pertain to politics, the law, and the economy, such as that human beings have natural rights and that commodities have intrinsic values (i.e., fictions of the sort that Marx identified in his theory of ideology).
The functional mechanisms. It seems plausible to say that these errors are at least enabled and in many cases downright caused by superhuman or superindividual mechanisms which, if not exactly purposive, at least have a functional character. Two such mechanisms are (a) evolution by natural selection and (b) social ideology. Let us briefly consider each of them in turn.

a Evolution by natural selection. Much evolutionary epistemology has been optimistic in character: it assumes that human beings possess a lot of knowledge and then attempts to explain this supposed fortunate condition in terms of evolution by natural selection (Konrad Lorenz’s attempt to explain our supposed synthetic a priori knowledge as an innate acquisition due to evolution by natural selection is an example of this; so too is much contemporary evolutionary epistemology, for instance the work of Daniel Dennett). In some version or other such an optimistic account no doubt supplies part of the truth about the relation between evolution and cognition. However, if one keeps in mind the sort of massive occurrence of erroneous belief among human beings that has just been sketched, it becomes attractive to complement such an optimistic account with a more pessimistic one: evolution by natural selection also enables or causes much error. (One is reminded here of Hesiod’s Muses, who sometimes inspire human beings with truths but sometimes with errors.) Consider, first of all, the enabling. Even in cases where evolution’s requirement of adaptiveness does not actually cause erroneous beliefs, it may nonetheless be ‘indifferent’ to them (or they to it) in a way that leaves a ‘space’ in which they can just as well occur as true beliefs. Our perceptions of the sun as moving, or of heavenly bodies as small, might be examples of this; these objects’ physical remoteness from us entailed that at least until very recently the contest between such perceptions and their opposites had no consequences for our actions, nor, therefore, for adaptiveness. In this connection, the following point also seems important. Since it is in the end only our physical behavior that either contributes to or undermines our fitness for survival, not whatever nuances in our outlooks lie behind it, evolution’s requirement of adaptiveness only, as it were, ‘cares’ about the extensional reliability of our beliefs, not about their intensional reliability. For example (to illustrate the thought), it may be very important for the fitness of individuals for surviving in a rain forest that they eat plant species X, which is nutritious, but avoid eating plant species Y, which is poisonous, and therefore that they be able to make judgments that discriminate between the two species and which identify X as a species to be eaten but Y as one to be avoided. But from the standpoint of fitness for survival it may be a matter