



IS SKEPTICISM A KIND OF ILLOGICAL DOGMA FOR FREETHINKERS?

There is a familiar and long-standing attack on skepticism of all kinds. It goes like this: if you say that nothing is certain, then you are saying that something is certain, namely, that nothing is certain. The objection gets it wrong, though, about what can or cannot be certain. That nothing is certain is no revealed truth. It is not a claim that must be accepted without question, which is what a dogma is. To say that nothing is certain simply reflects experience. It is a succinct statement in support of skepticism, though it involves a loss of detail that so many simple statements do.

"Nothing is certain" is not dogmatic such that all facts and reason must be forced into conformity with it. It is not even universally true. Suppose, for example, that someone begins drinking some milk and finds that it has soured. "This milk tastes terrible!" they say. Can it be that they are mistaken and the milk, in fact, is perfectly fine and tastes good? It could be, of course, that the person in question has some sensory or neurological defect that causes them to taste good milk as if it were bad. But it cannot be uncertain that, to them, the milk tastes terrible, assuming they are not lying.

So what does it really mean to say that "nothing is certain?" It means that everything we know or believe that we know has a context. That is, we believe things for reasons and on the basis of relevant facts. Even the person who thought the milk had soured might find that they do have some sensory or neurological defect. Or that they had just eaten or drank something that had altered their sense of taste such that the conclusion they had reached – that the milk had soured – came into question even though it had not tasted right to them at the time.

Now with respect to facts, it is evident that they do not come in a fixed supply. We can depend on new facts about many things being continually discovered. The facts we know are dwarfed by those that we have not yet found. Experience also teaches us that new facts are often surprising and may arise in unexpected ways. Sometimes long-known facts are overlooked, thought unimportant or even forgotten but turn out to be relevant. Often, the significance of some facts are not realized until others are found or rediscovered. The relevance of facts are always obvious once their significance is appreciated but seldom before. Too, there is always a great deal of "noise." There are a variety of things that are believed or claimed to be facts but which can be counter-intuitive, not reasonably well-established, or even deliberate falsehoods. So even what is a fact and what is not a fact can be in question.

It is itself a puzzle as to how we make sense of the facts. It is not a self-executing process in the way that our brains produce intelligible mental images from the light that falls on our retinas. It is not even a self-explanatory process, much less one that we can describe how to do. The universe does not present us with premises from which we can easily draw the straightforward logical conclusions. It takes an element of imagination and, clearly, luck, to relate facts to one another and then, through further investigation, to discover whether those relations hold up. There is a philosophy of science that deals with this, but the same process must happen with all of what we think we understand. Even language often requires that we "fill in the blanks" with context and we laugh at jokes that involve surprising twists and turns of such kinds.

One thing is clear: facts alone do not help us to understand very much. But reasoning without facts is just as useless. As David Hume observed:

"If we reason a priori [by reason alone], anything may appear able to produce anything. The falling of a pebble may, for aught we know, extinguish the sun; or the wish of a man control the planets in

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their orbits. It is only experience, which teaches us the nature and bounds of cause and effect, and enables us to infer the existence of one object from that of another."

But, of course, then the problem is which experience and what evidence can teach us what we would like to know. And experience teaches us that it is easy, even relying on evidence, to reach false conclusions.

This is really what skepticism is about, and especially skepticism concerning what are considered to be religious questions. Believers understand this perfectly well when it comes to what they don't believe in. They just fail to grasp, or refuse to apply these principles to their own beliefs. The more honest of them call it "faith," belief in things for which there is insufficient evidence or in the teeth of controverting evidence. As the early Christian Church Father Tertullian put it: "I believe because it is absurd." How, then, can Freethinkers' religious skepticism be condemned on the basis of unthinking word-play?

For religious skeptics such as we, to say "nothing is certain" is simply to say that, when it comes to our knowledge about the universe, knowledge that depends critically on objective criteria and free and open analysis, it is and may always be incomplete and subject to revision. This is not a matter of dogma. It simply reflects the reality that there are always additional questions that we may ask concerning anything. And it takes time to absorb and integrate new facts and new ways of thinking. But three words are more appealing than several dozen. And those who embrace dogmas would like to suppose that everyone else does as well and that there is no alternative.

**PLANNED FOR NEXT MONTH:
"THE HOLIDAYS ARE
HERE AGAIN"
>>> Sunday, November 3rd, 2013 <<<
SHERATON GRAND DFW AIRPORT
SE CORNER OF 114 AND ESTERS**

**YOUR GENEROUS DONATIONS TO THE
NTCOF ARE NEEDED, APPRECIATED,
AND TAX-DEDUCTIBLE!!**

All NTCOF events can be found through our website calendar, or through our meetup page, from which you can RSVP, at:
- www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought -
JOIN THE NTCOF MEETUP GROUP !!!

Social Luncheon: Today, immediately after our Service, join us for lunch and discussion at the Golden Corral Buffet and Grill in Grapevine, located just across from the Grapevine Mills Mall, at 2605 E. Grapevine Mills Circle, phone (972) 874-7900. To reach Golden Corral from the Sheraton, cross over the freeway and make a left onto John W. Carpenter Freeway (114) going west. Then take the first exit RIGHT onto International Parkway (121), then Grapevine Mills Parkway exit. Turn LEFT on Stars and Stripes Way, continuing on to E. Grapevine Mills Circle.

Freethought Salon: Get together to discuss today's service topic or other conundrums of interest for Freethinkers. Most Sundays, over breakfast, at the Hilton Vineyard in Grapevine beginning 10:30 AM; see the meetup site!

Game Night: The regular game night crew meets nearly every Friday night at the IHOP on 2310 Stemmons Trail (I-35), near Northwest Highway (Loop 12). Plan to arrive at about 7:30 PM, and stay late playing Risk, Rummikub, and other fun games!

Secular Singles: Freethinkers have met their life-partners through the Secular Singles group. Check the meetup site for the next date, time and location!

**"Reason has built the modern world. It is a precious but also a fragile thing, which can be corroded by apparently harmless irrationality. We must favor verifiable evidence over private feeling. Otherwise we leave ourselves vulnerable to those who would obscure the truth."
- Richard Dawkins**



DFWCOR

Dallas-Fort Worth Coalition of Reason

The North Texas Church of Freethought
The Fellowship of Unbelievers

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