

An Apology for Skepticism. Why Constructive Skepticism?

L'apologie du scepticisme. Pourquoi le scepticisme constructif?

O justificare pentru scepticism. De ce scepticism constructiv?

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Abstract

In a 2005 essay Umberto Eco stated that "we are supposed to live in a skeptical age. In fact we live in age of outrageous credulity." Although his argument is primarily centered on religion losing ground lately due to increasing consumerism and mass-industrialization, it can easily be applied to almost any sphere of modern man's existence. Eco's point, and our own in writing this study on the necessity of constructive skepticism, is not that religion, mysticism or the occult are a benefic substitute for scientific discoveries, but that a society which conceives of itself as skeptical and rational is so willing to give up religion on the ground of its irrational character, and to take up the most phantasmagoric theories (e.g. The Da Vinci Code, alien attacks, etc.) instead, without realizing that a possible absurdity is often carelessly replaced by a probable one.

Résumé

Dans un essai de 2005, Umberto Eco a déclaré que "nous sommes censés vivre dans une ère du sceptique. En fait, nous vivons à l'ère de la crédulité scandaleuse." Même si son argument est principalement centrée sur la religion qui perde de terrain ces derniers temps à cause de l'augmentation du consumérisme et de la masse-industrialisation, il peut facilement être appliqué à presque tous les domaines de l'existence de l'homme moderne. L'idée d'Eco, et la notre pour écrire cette étude sur la nécessité du scepticisme constructif, n'est pas que la religion, le mysticisme ou l'occultisme sont un substitut bénéfique aux découvertes scientifiques, mais qu'une société qui conçoit de lui-même en tant que sceptique et rationnelle est si disposée à renoncer à la religion en raison de son caractère irrationnel et à relever les théories plus fantasmagoriques (p. ex. Le Da Vinci Code, des attaques extraterrestres, etc.) au lieu de cela, sans se rendre compte qu'une absurdité possible est souvent négligemment remplacée par une absurdité probable.

Rezumat

Într-un eseu din anul 2005 Umberto Eco afirmă că "avem impresia că trăim într-o era a scepticismului. De fapt trăim într-o era a naivității absolute". Cu toate că argumentația sa se referă în principal la religie și la modul în care aceasta și-a pierdut autoritatea datorită consumerismului și industrializării, ea se poate aplica cu ușurință la orice aspect al vieții moderne. Ideea de bază a lui Eco, cât și a prezentului studiu critic, nu este că religia, misticismul sau ocultismul sunt înlocuitori benefici pentru știință, ci că o societate care se consideră sceptică și rațională nu ar trebui să adopte cu asemenea ușurință teorii fantasmagorice (vezi Codul lui Da Vinci, teorii despre atacuri extratereste asupra pământului, etc.), fără a realiza că o posibilă absurditate este neglijent înlocuită cu una probabilă.

Keywords: *skepticism, religion, science, reason, cultural reevaluation*

Mots clés: *scepticisme, religion, science, raison, revalorisation culturelle*

Cuvinte cheie: *scepticism, religie, știință, rațiune, reevaluare culturală*

A doubt without an end is not even a doubt. (Ludwig Wittgenstein)

In a 2005 article, the renowned linguist and writer of fiction Umberto Eco stated that “we are supposed to live in a skeptical age. In fact we live in age of outrageous credulity.” [1] Although his argument is primarily centered on religious rites losing more and more ground lately due to increasing consumerism and mass-industrialization, it can easily be applied to almost any sphere of modern man’s public and private existence. In the course of history, along with an overwhelming development in the field of scientific discovery and a fantastic growth in affluence in industrialized countries, spirituality and ethical norms of conduct seem to have grown neglected:

We are now approaching the critical time of the year for shops and supermarkets: the month before Christmas is the four weeks when stores of all kinds sell their products fastest. Father Christmas means one thing to children: presents. He has no connection with the original St Nicholas, who performed a miracle in providing dowries for three poor sisters, thereby enabling them to marry and escape a life of prostitution. [2]

Furthermore, a brief look at the past years’ international bestseller lists testifies to our being no longer willing to bow to what used to be the pillars of social and spiritual life: commercial booms like Dan Brown’s *Da VinciCode* or the more recent *The Lost Tomb of Jesus*, by Hollywood producer James Cameron, clearly point to the fact that we are well on our way to annulling all of our traditional value systems, nevertheless – and this would probably be the point where Eco identifies the profound crisis of modern society – without being able to replace them with anything. This is what Dr. Eric H. Cline, Associate Professor of Classics and of Anthropology (Ancient History and Archaeology) and Chair of the Department of Classical and Semitic Languages and Literatures at The George Washington University, states about pseudo-scientific documentaries apparently based on Biblical realities:

The amount of pseudo-scientific nonsense that has been published on so-called “mysteries” of the Bible is appalling. The vast majority of this work has not been produced by professional scholars but by amateur enthusiasts. These enthusiasts--most of whom are self-trained and self-employed, and some of whom publish only, or primarily, on the Internet--all work outside of academia. As such, they are not held to the same standards of rigor, peer review, and scrutiny as professional scholars employed by colleges, universities, and other institutions of higher learning. Indeed, the work of such enthusiasts frequently meets the criteria of “junk science,” especially when it “advocates a cause, pays little attention to the investigative process, ignores contrary evidence, and advertises a high moral purpose.” In his talk, Dr. Cline will present, and debunk, examples of such junk science--especially as it pertains to topics such as the possible locations of the Garden of Eden, Noah’s Ark, Sodom and Gomorrah, the Ark of the Covenant, and the Ten Lost Tribes--and issue a call to arms for professional archaeologists, ancient historians, and biblical scholars to take back their fields from the amateur enthusiasts, pseudo-scientists, and irresponsible documentary filmmakers who have had, for the most part, free reign to do what they wish, without any regard to scientific method or an unbiased investigation for the truth. [3]

Science, as well as the dominant political ideologies characteristic of the 20th century, especially communism, have failed in a spectacular manner in trying to provide not only logical explanations, but also a reason, a meaning to existence. Moreover, as Eco states, scientists themselves will most often experience a certain point in their lives where the process of exploration seems to come to an abrupt and unexplainable end, and where the “temptation” of retrieving into the realm of religion, or at least of the occult, seems literally overpowering:

Human beings are religious animals. It is psychologically very hard to go through life without the justification, and the hope, provided by religion. You can see this in the positivist scientists of the 19th century. They insisted that they were describing the universe in rigorously materialistic terms - yet at night they attended séances and tried to summon up the spirits of the dead. Even today, I frequently meet scientists who, outside their own narrow discipline, are superstitious - to such an extent that it sometimes seems to me that to be a rigorous unbeliever today, you have to be a philosopher. Or perhaps a priest. [4]

Eco's point, and by extension our own in writing this critical study on the necessity of constructive skepticism, is not that religion, mysticism or occult sciences are a benefic substitute for scientific discoveries, but that a society which conceives of itself as being skeptical and rational is so willing to give up religion on the ground of its irrational character, and to take up the most phantasmagoric theories (e.g. *The Da Vinci Code*, alien attacks, etc.) instead, without realizing that a possible absurdity is carelessly replaced by a probable one:

The "death of God", or at least the dying of the Christian God, has been accompanied by the birth of a plethora of new idols. They have multiplied like bacteria on the corpse of the Christian Church -- from strange pagan cults and sects to the silly, sub-Christian superstitions of *The Da Vinci Code*. It is amazing how many people take that book literally, and think it is true. Admittedly, Dan Brown, its author, has created a legion of zealous followers who believe that Jesus wasn't crucified: he married Mary Magdalene, became the King of France, and started his own version of the order of Freemasons. Many of the people who now go to the Louvre are there only to look at the Mona Lisa, solely and simply because it is at the centre of Dan Brown's book. [5]

Only the one who never doubts the current state of affairs can consider the world, the social system and even himself perfect. This is a quite dangerous attitude, as it undoubtedly leads to an obsessive discourse and to the impossibility of evolution. From time to time, we ought to re-evaluate and reshape our perception of the world and of ourselves, in order not to let ourselves be caught up in the wicked circle of traditional, but sometimes false views. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus himself repeatedly warns the Jewish spiritual leaders about the danger represented by tradition and the blind following of irrational rituals: e.g. plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath (Mt 12:1-8), healing on the Sabbath (Mt 12:9-14), eating with unwashed hands (Mt 15:1-9) were traditionally considered sinful within the Jewish cultural and religious space. Jesus revolutionizes this view by stating that "out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders (Mt 15:19) [...] these are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man." (Mt 15:20) [6]. At the opposite pole one could place assertions like the following, central to Roman Catholic belief: "It is an article of faith from a decree of the Vatican Council that Tradition is a source of theological teaching distinct from Scripture, and that it is infallible. It is therefore to be received with the same internal assent of Scripture, for it is the word of God." (Catholic Dictionary), or "Do you have to believe in Tradition? Yes, because it is the Word of God and has equal authority with the Bible." [7]

During the time spent as a faculty member and college dean in Chicago, Wayne Booth repeatedly observed the incapacity of most protest groups to make themselves heard. He linked this primarily to the existence in the individual's mind of certain "modernist dogmas about belief and doubt, which becloud reasonable judgment and therefore make logical argument impossible.

In the late sixties, I became puzzled, both as a student of rhetoric and as a harried dean, by the inability of most protest groups to get themselves heard and by the equal failure of what one of my students called "establishment protestees" to make their responses intelligible ... Few of the failures, seemed caused by sheer slovenliness or ineptitude ... Even the most skillful stylists and logicians relied on unspoken assumptions that beclouded every line. And whenever I tried dutifully to trace those assumptions back to a point of agreement from which a meeting of minds might begin, I found that I was finally grappling not simply with

political assumptions ... but with some version of the modernist dogmas about belief and doubt that I have made central here. [8]

In his analytical study of Booth entitled *Man and Mission: Construing Wayne Booth's Theology of Literature as Rhetoric*, Prof. Eric Gilder interprets the above statement as Booth's realization of the destructive existence of certain fixed patterns of thinking within the modern world, patterns usually identified with the painfully relative notion of "truth":

In the words of the ground thus traveled, in this work Booth is arguing that creative social "knowing" in the modern age has been foreshortened and crippled by the broad social acceptance of a false creed that preaches that there is an unambiguous "either/or" split between the personal perception methods of tight "logic" and loose "emotion" and, thus, between the social-world construing dividing of "facts" from the world of "values". A consequence of such an unnatural analytical division of selves within each individual personal self and each social self, Booth argues, has been the exaggeration of the inherent weakness of excessive "tight" construing (i.e. "scientism") and "loose" construing (i.e. "motivism") of social knowledge, leading to both intellectual rigor mortis and intellectual schizophrenia. Unlike *A Rhetoric of Irony*, in which Booth held that if he "did not save the world, all is not lost" in Modern Dogma, his social prophetic intent is to personally "save the world" from socially destructive discourse. [9]

We will take Prof. Gilder's approach as starting point for our discussion of skepticism, as it basically pins down the essential requirements of a constructively skeptical mind/weltanschauung. According to the above view, one of the main flaws of the modern world is its exaggerated trust in concepts taken to embody the notion of truth. On the other hand, the gap between reason and emotion, logical rigor and passionate belief, are operating as destructive driving forces in society, making objective discourse impossible. Why should we take this interpretation as advocating skepticism? First and foremost, because it pins down the necessity of abandoning either/or models of thinking which leave no room for doubt as a constructive means of reaching truth. Furthermore, the socially destructive discourse addressed by Prof. Gilder is evident in the modern world's creating and nurturing of false new idols (e.g. science) and its iconoclasm directed towards other, traditional ones, a phenomenon ultimately resulting in self-deception and disillusion. Constructive skepticism, therefore, should be adopted as the dominant world-view in order to avoid such types of destructive discourse which merely offer the illusion of certainty and stability, but in fact are based on deception and even deceit. Neither science nor emotion alone can grant a sufficiently broad understanding of the world. To paraphrase Paul Klee's statement according to which art is not visible, but rather makes visible, constructive skepticism is not necessarily truth, but can lead to it by means of a more analytical approach to the slippery concept of reality. Constructive skepticism (even though it may seem a term paradoxical in nature) therefore refers to the necessity of re-evaluating dominant social discourse in view of avoiding dogmatic belief. It means re-shaping rather than destroying, doubting rather than denying. In its essence, constructive skepticism is situated on the borderline between optimism and pessimism, lacking the radical either/or dimension of the two.

To illustrate this lack of destructiveness of constructive skepticism we will resort to Michael Lind's article "America still works". Lind's argument is centered on the illusive image of imminent destruction media projects concerning present-day US realities. According to Lind,

Anyone who reads the serious press about the condition of the US might be excused believing that the country is headed towards a series of deep crises. The impression exacerbated by economic slowdown and by the presidential primaries, in which candidates announce bold plans to rescue the country from disaster. But even in more normal times there are three ubiquitous myths about America that make the country seem weaker and more chaotic than it really is. The first myth, which is mainly a conservative one, is that racial and ethnic rivalries are tearing America apart. The second myth, which is mainly a

liberal one, is that America will soon be overwhelmed by religious fundamentalists. The third myth, an economic one beloved of centrists, is that the retirement of the baby boomers will bankrupt the country because of runaway security entitlement costs.

America does, of course, have many problems, such as spiraling healthcare costs and a decline in social mobility. Yet the truth is that apart from the temporary frictions caused by current immigration from Latin America, the US is more integrated than ever. [10]

The attitude helped forward by Lind is one of constructive skepticism: neither exaggerated belief in the USA's superpowers, nor depressive prediction of its downfall are healthy and reasonable standpoints. A realization of the existence of problems and shortcomings, along with a balanced appreciation of their gravity would make up a much more profitable view, which is not affected by the destructiveness of the dominant either/or model.

Furthermore, Lind argues, one can notice a growing trend towards secularization in the USA, with a 2001 study of religious attitudes among Americans showing that Americans professing no religion at all are now the third largest belief group in the US, their number, 30 million, being almost as large as that of the Baptists. In addition to this, according to the Gallup millennium survey of religious views, Americans (the US plus Canada) who attend church at least once a week make up only 47 per cent of the population, and there are scholars claiming that even this number is artificially inflated, people being embarrassed to tell pollsters how rarely they attend church. The survey results employed by Lind deal an almost deadly blow to a typically modernist dogmatic view, to paraphrase Booth, according to which Europe is more secular than the USA. If anything, secularization is equally strong on both continents, further evincing a trend towards skepticism as dominant worldview. Concluding, Lind argues that the reason behind this exaggeratedly pessimistic depiction of American realities is what he calls "the bias towards sensationalism that afflicts all commercial media" and "the distortion of the facts by special interests" [11]. He therefore indirectly speaks in favor of constructive skepticism, taking it up as a necessary means of dealing with media representation of social and political facts, which are often distorted for the sake of sensationalism or unorthodox interests. Especially in a 21st century context, media, along with science and all mathematically or logically quantifiable "facts" are taken as the most reliable source of information and blindly trusted, sometimes perpetuating false and even dangerously misleading views. What Booth labels modernist dogma is identified in Lind's case with media manipulation and distortion.

Coming back to Booth, Prof. Eric Gilder argues that the ultimate scope of Booth's *Modern Dogma* is to

critically to explicate what he has previously claimed: that "oughts" can (and should) be derived from what "is", for, if we cannot derive what we should do in the future from what faces us in the present, we are lost. "The distinction between what is and what ought to be, between fact and value, never won total acceptance even at the heights of modernism ... Philosophies, which, like Plato's and Aristotle's and Spinoza's in some sense discover the *ought* in this *is* have always had adherents," including Hobbes, Locke, Kant and Hume (14-15). Specifically, Booth wishes to refute the modern view, expressed best by Popper, that, "it is impossible to derive a sentence stating a norm or a decision from a sentence stating a fact; this is only another way of saying that it is impossible to derive norms or decisions or proposals from facts"...

So, even though the "logical" ground of modernism is shaky at best, Booth personally realizes that it is still a "hard nut to crack", for many notable scientists (and persons and disciplines that wish to be thought of as "scientific") still affectively hold fast to the comfort of its dogmas, its "certainty". But crack it we must, Booth evangelistically claims, for this philosophy threatens our individual and social progress. It "has saddled us with standards of truth under which no man can live" (xii). Booth, therefore, calls us to look

towards a practical philosophy, or rhetoric, wherein we can again locate “the art of discovering warrantable beliefs and improving those beliefs in shared discourse”. [12]

The main issue posed in this context is the difficulty of properly knowing what “is”, as this undoubtedly raises a number of highly complex questions. Upon what grounds does one establish what “is”? This is where constructive skepticism comes in. Refraining from a clear-cut statement on what “is”, it rather wishes to express what “seems to be” or what “should be”. Unlike pessimism, it does not state that what “is remains unknowable and indescribable, and unlike optimism it refrains from clearly stating that something is undoubtedly describable and analyzable in a certain way. One thing is certain according to Booth: present-day discourse is faulty and overloaded with seeming truths – a reality which calls for rapid and dramatic re-evaluation.

A similar point of view is upheld by Horia Roman Patapievici in his argumentative work *Despre idei si blocaje* (“On Ideas and Stumbling Blocks”). Patapievici’s main thesis is that Romania is facing an anomalous cultural situation of *non sequitur*, materialized in the lack of critical and analytic responses to new cultural ideas which at some point in time enter the Romanian cultural space. His reasoning is centered on the necessity of response as pathway to evaluation and re-evaluation of discourse. Given the fact that in Romania no revolutionary idea or concept brings about any sort of cultural reaction or response, but is either blindly dismissed or irresponsibly taken over, we are, in Patapievici’s opinion, irremediably doomed to live in a society of “forms with no substance” (to paraphrase Maiorescu’s well known concept of “forme fara fond”) [13]. Constructive skepticism, in this context, could offer the necessary distance for properly evaluating and responding to elements of novelty inevitably invading any cultural space.

What should a 21st century citizen, permanently assaulted with all sorts of ground-shattering pieces of information, do in order not to become a victim of an age when information is increasingly becoming a destructive rather than a benefic part of everyday life? What or whom can or should we trust, without being put in the highly unpleasant position of having to admit only a few hours later that we were terribly wrong? As paradoxical as it might sound, skepticism is the only solution open to us, the only way of escaping the disastrous consequences that “outrageous credulity” Eco mentions will sooner or later bring about. A closer look at the actual meaning of skepticism might turn out useful at this point, all the more so if we consider that the term can be defined from a variety of angles (philosophical, religious, etc.), which do not always coincide, and, moreover, which do not all suit the approach to skepticism aimed at in this study.

According to most encyclopedia entries, in ordinary usage, skepticism (from the Greek *skeptomai*, to look about, to consider) can be associated with either of the following meanings:

1. an attitude of doubt or a disposition to incredulity either in general or toward a particular object;
2. the doctrine that true knowledge or knowledge in a particular area is uncertain; or
3. the method of suspended judgment, systematic doubt, or criticism that is characteristic of skeptics. [14]

In philosophy, and here one can witness some crucial differences to the explanations provided above, skepticism refers more specifically to a set of specific propositions. These include propositions about:

1. the limitations of knowledge;
2. a method of obtaining knowledge through systematic doubt and continual testing (this would most probably be the closest one could get to constructive skepticism);
3. the arbitrariness, relativity, or subjectivity of moral values;
4. a method of intellectual caution and suspended judgment;
5. a lack of confidence in positive motives for human conduct or positive outcomes for human enterprises (this doctrine quite clearly moves in the direction of cynicism and pessimism and does not relate to the notion of constructive skepticism discussed here).

Still another perspective is offered by classical philosophy. In this particular context, skepticism refers to the teachings of the *Skeptikoi*, a school of philosophers who are said to have never asserted, but only opined. This philosophical trend which also goes by the name of pyrrhonism, suggests a position and an outlook on existence which avoid the postulation of final truths. Without pushing things too far, we could even assert that analyzing itself, skepticism would question that skepticism is a valid perspective at all. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy describes the skeptic as someone who has “suspended judgment”, therefore, not as someone who consciously denies everything, but who does not want to take up a clear position regarding any issue, because he doubts the possibility of acquiring absolute knowledge:

Sextus Empiricus, who flourished at the end of the second century A.D., describes the “skeptic” (from a Greek verb meaning “to examine carefully”) as an “investigator” (a “zetetic”). According to Sextus, the skeptic is someone who has investigated the questions of philosophy but has “suspended judgment” (practicing *epochê*) because he is unable to resolve the differences among the contrary attitudes, opinions and arguments he found. Instead of adhering to a definite philosophical position, the skeptic is someone who continues to investigate. [15]

Turning to the religious sphere, skepticism, according to Merriam-Webster, refers to doubt concerning basic religious principles (as immortality, providence, and revelation). It is furthermore defined as a sort of systematic incredulity towards religious teachings, nevertheless, stressing the fact that one should not mistake it for atheism, as a religious skeptic does not deny the existence of a deity, but merely doubts it. Therefore, religious skepticism is a type of skepticism relating to religion, but should not be confused with atheism. Religious skeptics question religious authority and are not necessarily anti-religious but are those skeptical of a specific or all religious beliefs or practices. Socrates was one of the first religious skeptics, questioning the legitimacy of the beliefs of his time in the existence of the various gods.

Moreover, mention should be made of another interesting component of any proper definition of “skepticism”: although the word can characterize a position regarding a single claim (that is, one can be skeptical at a certain point in time and credulous at another), in scholastic circles it more frequently describes a lasting mindset, a regular and repetitive approach to accepting or rejecting new information. One should also note that individuals who proclaim to have a skeptical outlook are frequently called skeptics, often without regard to whether what they profess is philosophical or empirical skepticism.

Referring to the motto of this study, we might state that we have chosen constructive skepticism, and not merely skepticism, as the main focus of this study in order to prove that a balanced skeptical view on life and the world might turn out to be productive in the end, as its central concern is not questioning for the sake of doing so, but questioning in order to gain knowledge. The absence of doubt might not result in bliss, but, on the contrary, turn out to be counterproductive. A constructive skeptic does not take anything for granted not because he is essentially an iconoclast and takes delight in being one, but because he realizes that in order to assure progress questioning and re-evaluating are vital. Constructive skepticism, as opposed to ordinary incredulity, always aims at “coming to an end”, at reaching a better and more complex conclusion about the present state of affairs.

In spite of all contrary evidence, skepticism leaves open the possibility that truth might be found. This is a surprisingly optimistic approach for a trend of thought most people would conceive of as being essentially negativistic. The main point here is that skepticism can, as paradoxical as it may sound, be constructive, if and only if it is used in order to perfect one’s perception of the world and oneself, in other words, if it is employed in order to find truth. Ordinary incredulity or cheap pessimism clearly does not fall into this category, as its aim is destructive and iconoclastic. Skepticism not only maintains that human beings can never arrive at any kind of certain knowledge,

but it seems to imply that reaching this sort of certainty would hardly be a blessing. We should remember here the final scene of Goethe's *Faust*, where the previously damned protagonist is saved on ground of his eternal striving for ultimate truth and beauty, although in the end of the drama he is far from having succeeded in finding them. It is just this striving that persuades God to save the soul of his restless servant ("Es irrt der Mensch, so lang er strebt" – "Humans err as long as they strive.") [16].

Still another proof that skepticism does not have to be destructive is a closer look at the history of Western philosophy, more precisely at how Descartes set about creating a new perspective in Western epistemology: what if nothing were true? How, if you started out doubting anything and everything, could you find something that was true? The ultimate conclusion he reached was the famous *Cogito ergo sum*. From this fundamental belief he gradually built up a series of other true propositions, including the existence of God - because essentially that was Descartes' main goal: to prove the existence of God and the validity of the Christian religion. This endeavor testifies to the fact that skepticism was at times undoubtedly a constructive trend of thought. Doubting everything not in order to shatter the pillars of individual and collective consciousness, but to prove that those pillars were built on solid ground can by no means be regarded as destructive. (In many ways, Descartes was trying to accomplish the same thing that Augustine, Boethius, and other early Christian thinkers were attempting: how do you address the possibility, firmly entrenched in the Western tradition, that there may be no such thing as certain knowledge? How do you reconcile that with religious faith?)

We have started our argumentation by referring to Eco's quote regarding our age of "outrageous credulity". There is, nevertheless, something which might prove Eco at least partially wrong: the quite impressive number of books, articles and websites dealing with the benefic effect of even a small amount of skepticism in our lives: *Why People Believe Weird Things: Pseudoscience, Superstition, and Other Confusions of Our Times*, by Michael Shermer, W. H. Freeman and Company, 1997 (book; includes a chapter on how to be a skeptic); *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*, by Carl Sagan, Ballantine Books, 1996 (book); *How to Think about Weird Things: Critical Thinking for a New Age*, by Theodore Schick, Jr. and Lewis Vaughn, Mayfield Publishing Company, 1995-1999 (book); *Better Read That Again: Web Hoaxes and Misinformation* (website); *Jim Lippard's Skeptical Information* (website); *The Skeptic's Dictionary* (website); *Public Relations Blue Smoke, Mirrors, and Designer Science: How the Public Relations Industry Compromises Democracy*, by Brian Siano, (article, *The Skeptic*, Vol. 7. No.1, 1999, pages 45 to 55). All of these seem to be centered on the following remark made by Steve Allen in his self-improvement guide *Dumbth: The Lost Art of Thinking with 101 Ways to Reason Better & Improve Your Mind*: "First learn - and then remind yourself every day - that simply because you read something in a book, magazine or newspaper, it does not automatically follow that it is true." [17] It is, nevertheless, highly interesting to note that most of these websites, magazines and scholarly journals focusing on skepticism can be found within the boundaries of the Anglo-Saxon cultural space (i.e. USA, Great Britain and Canada).

The fact that so many of these books and websites are centered on the fact that media professionalism and the so-called "age of information" are simply illusions and that, actually, the unknowing and unsuspecting citizen is lured into a trap of elaborate deception, is alarming, to say the least. The only positive thing about it is that modern man seems to grow increasingly aware of the deceptive nature of his environment. Not all of us live in age of outrageous credulity... and even the most convinced skeptic would have to admit that this conclusion entails, at least, a reason for hope.

To conclude, unfortunately there is no single or simple way to distinguish constructive skepticism from destructive denial, just as there is no simple way to distinguish science from pseudoscience. An objective and complex analysis of the evidence and arguments on both sides of an issue is required to separate deniers from genuine skeptics. The characteristics outlined in this analytical study, however, should be helpful in making or at least attempting this determination.

Our study is also meant to be a useful guide to help skeptics avoid turning unwillingly from skepticism to denial. We (the author of this study humbly includes herself in this syntagm) must as skeptics try to stay dedicated to the constructive means of skeptical inquiry, and be constantly on the lookout against adopting conclusions of other skeptics as a belief unto themselves, which are to be defended at all costs. By helping us to recognize and reject the tactics of simple denial, constructive skepticism can turn us into better skeptics, endowed with a better world- and self-awareness.

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