

Bilkent University
HUM 331: Honors Seminar
Skepticism in Philosophy, Literature, and Film
Instructor: Dragan Ilic
Fall 2016



Course Description:

Skepticism as a philosophical outlook has its origin in ancient Greek philosophy and has been most commonly characterized by two distinctive features. First of all, it is based on a *thesis* that nothing can be known. The thesis is usually followed by a sort of *prescription*: since nothing can be known one should suspend judgment on all matters. Historically, the thesis that nothing can be known prevailed over the prescription within the tradition of Cartesian skepticism. The prescription, on the other hand, dominated the Pyrrhonist school of skeptical thought leading to practical questions such as is skepticism livable at all and can the skeptic actually enact a total suspension of judgment?

In this seminar we will take a fundamentally different tack and will show that skepticism is neither understood as a philosophical doctrine characterized by a thesis that nothing can be known, nor is it primarily understood as a skeptical prescription that advises us to suspend judgment on all matters ceasing to claim knowledge, but is revealed rhetorically and understood as a rather peculiar form of writing. In a word, we will transform skepticism from a form of doubt to a form of narration. As a result, skepticism will not be considered as a purely formal, intellectual matter, and accordingly, a *philosophical* skeptic will not end up as being nothing more than the straw man of epistemology textbooks, which is his common doom in many analytic seminars on philosophical skepticism. Accordingly, we shall study how “our” authors and their texts perform a hard narrative labor against such a simplistic philosophical account of skepticism.

The underlying premise of the seminar is that skepticism is neither a historical nor a cultural constant. Our syllabus is thus divided into six parts and is arranged chronologically: skepticism in antiquity, in early modernity, in the Enlightenment, in Romanticism, skepticism at the very beginning of the 20th century, and finally skepticism and postmodernism. Along the highroad of skepticism, we shall explore several key topics: the rhetoric of skepticism; the difference between Academic, Pyrrhonist, and Cartesian skepticisms; skepticism giving rise to toleration and liberalism, on the one hand, and segregation and conservatism on the other; religious skepticism and the relationship between skepticism and human passions; skepticism and modern cynical culture; skepticism about language and truth; and, last but not least, skepticism in the world of simulation.

We will thoroughly examine the following cluster of philosophical concepts: skepticism, *skepsis* (inquiry), doubt, other-mind skepticism, suspension of judgment (*epochē*), happiness as peace of mind or tranquility (*ataraxia*), arguing on both sides of the question (*dissoi logoi*), thought-experiment, nihilism, cynicism, postmodernism and so on.

We shall also explore a series of key rhetorical and literary concepts characteristic of skeptical writing such as irony, hyperbole, paradox, first-person narration, essay, fragment, negative adjectives, narrative imagining, to mention only a few.

Thus conceived, the course has a few central objectives just as it builds a few intellectual skills. You will be introduced to a variety of Western skeptical thinking and will, ideally, come to appreciate both its intellectual advantages as well as its drawbacks. You will be asked to read closely and think critically and not merely comprehend and reproduce the texts presented to you. It is this critical thinking coupled by careful, arduous reading that is the most important skill you will benefit from this class.