#### Even if counterintuitive, you should check your cognitive bias – the burden of proof is on them, not us.

**Copp 91**, Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the University of California, Davis. (David, “Moral Skepticism” Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition, June 1991, Vol. 62, No. 3, pp. 203-233, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/4320208.pdf>) rose

I believe that an impatience with the study of moral skepticism, and a defensive strategy for dealing with it, are prevalent among moral philosophers; the received view is that it is up to those who accept a skeptical position to formulate it and to express their reasons for accepting it in the form of a compelling argument. Even then I believe it would be typical to hold that we would have less reason to regard a skeptical argument as sound than to continue to accept our deeply held moral views, so a skeptical argument could be of no moral significance; perhaps we would learn something from defeating it, but we need only modify one or another of the strategies standardly used in defusing skepticism about the external world. In short, I think the dominant view is that moral skepticism can responsibly be ignored, at least until it is provided with an adequate and plausible formulation and a supporting argument that deserves serious study.

I claim, however, that there is a very general skeptical position about morality that cannot reasonably be ignored in this way. My goal in this paper is to define this position and to make plain its coherence, initial plausibility, and central importance in moral philosophy. It expresses widespread intuitive doubts about morality. It has moral significance because it can lead a person to view moral commitment as optional, in the way that we think a commitment to daily outdoor exercise is optional. It has philosophical significance because theories that aim to explain the nature and justification of morality must be evaluated as responses to it. The importance of skepticism warrants an aggressive strategy for dealing with it. Anti-skeptical philosophers need to investigate skepticism, and provide it with a formulation, in order to be able to argue that it is untenable.

#### Ought means moral obligation

Collins Dictionary no date, comprehensive print and online dictionary (“ought: in American English,” accessed 1/18/2026, https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/ought#google\_vignette) //Rock Chalk

ought in American English

(ɔt)

auxiliary verb

1.

(used to express duty or [moral](https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/moral) obligation)

Every citizen ought to help

2.

(used to express [justice](https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/justice), moral rightness, or the like)

He ought to be punished

You ought to be ashamed

3.

(used to express [propriety](https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/propriety), appropriateness, etc.)

You ought to be home early

We ought to bring her some flowers

4.

(used to express probability or [natural](https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/natural) [consequence](https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/consequence))

That ought to be our train now

noun

5.

duty or obligation

#### More evidence – moral obligation

**Merriam-Webster no date** (“ought: 3 of 4,” accessed 1/18/2026, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ought) //Rock Chalk

ought

3 of 4

[noun](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/noun)

[ˈȯt](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ought?pronunciation&lang=en_us&dir=o&file=ought004)

: moral obligation : [duty](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/duty)

#### Consequences fail.

#### 1. Assigning cost and benefit.

Markulla Center 14 (“Calculating Consequences:The Utilitarian Approach to Ethics,” Santa Clara Markulla Center for Applied Ethics, https://www.scu.edu/ethics/ethics-resources/ethical-decision-making/calculating-consequences-the-utilitarian-approach/)

While utilitarianism is currently a very popular ethical theory, there are some difficulties in relying on it as a sole method for moral decision-making. First, the utilitarian calculation requires that we assign values to the benefits and harms resulting from our actions and compare them with the benefits and harms that might result from other actions. But it's often difficult, if not impossible, to measure and compare the values of certain benefits and costs. How do we go about assigning a value to life or to art? And how do we go about comparing the value of money with, for example, the value of life, the value of time, or the value of human dignity? Moreover, can we ever be really certain about all of the consequences of our actions? Our ability to measure and to predict the benefits and harms resulting from a course of action or a moral rule is dubious, to say the least.

#### 2. Demandingness objection.

McElwee 17, Lecturer in Philosophy @ Southampton (Brian. “DEMANDINGNESS OBJECTIONS IN ETHICS.” The Philosophical Quarterly (1950-), vol. 67, no. 266, 2017, pp. 84–105. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44505417. Accessed: 1/18/26)—js

Some demandingness objections appear to have strong appeal. Consider one form of Maximising Act Consequentialism:

Max AC: We are morally obliged to bring about the best expected consequences, impartially considered, that we can. Any alternative action, or lifestyle, besides that which brings about the best expected consequences, is morally wrong.

Given the current state of the world, where there is so much preventable suffering, so many poor people with curable or preventable illnesses, it seems that if such a strict form of impartialist consequentialism is correct; each of us is morally required to devote almost all of our time and money to helping some of the world's worst-off. One's best bet in maximally promoting the impartial good will surely involve devoting oneself to improving the lot of the very needy, whether by working for, or raising money for, effective charities, or by campaigning for international trade justice.1 Max AC counter-intuitively implies then that if we spend any substantial amount of time living our own lives, pursuing our own goals, enjoying close personal relationships, we act wrongly. We may only do as much of these as necessary to keep ourselves healthy and sane enough to keep maximizing the impartial good.

#### NEG on presumption. If you are definitionally required by utilitarianism to bring about the best consequences, the only logical policy option to meet util’s moral obligation is:

#### The United States federal government should enact a policy which is mutually exclusive with, but Pareto optimal to, [plan]

Sager ’80 [Lawrence; former professor, NYU School of Law; Hofstra Law Review, “Pareto Superiority, Consent, and Justice,” vol. 8, no. 4, https://scholarlycommons.law.hofstra.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1371&context]

As no reader of the symposium can have escaped learning, the operative notion in Paretian analysis is that sometimes the choice between two states of affairs will involve one state which seems obviously to be preferred over its alternative in that at least one person is better off in this preferred state and no person is worse off. Where this can be said of state B as compared to state A, state B is described as Pareto superior to state A. Where, further, it can be said of state B that no other state of affairs enjoys as to it a relationship of Pareto superiority, then state B is described as Pareto optimal. Paretian analysis traditionally concerns itself with welfare, that is, with the subjective preferences of individuals within a society for various states of affairs. A more precise statement of Pareto superiority would thus be: "State of affairs B is Pareto superior to state of affairs A when at least one person prefers state B to A and no person is less content in state B than in A."

#### Descriptions are definite references.

Donnellan ’66 [Keith; July; former Professor of Philosophy at UCLA; The Philosophical Review, “Reference and Definite Descriptions,” vol. 75, no. 3, https://www.uvm.edu/~lderosse/courses/lang/Donnellan(1966).pdf]

I will call the two uses of definite descriptions I have in mind the attributive use and the referential use. A speaker who uses a definite description attributively in an assertion states something about whoever or whatever is the so-and-so. A speaker who uses a definite description referentially in an assertion, on the other hand, uses the description to enable ~~his~~ [their] audience to pick out whom or what ~~he is~~ [they are] talking about and states something about that person or thing. In the first case the definite description might be said to occur essentially, for the speaker wishes to assert something about whatever or whoever fits that description; but in the referential use the definite description is merely one tool for doing a certain job–calling attention to a person or thing–and in general any other device for doing the same job, another description or a name, would do as well. In the attributive use, the attribute of being the so-and-so is all important, while it is not in the referential use.

#### 3. The experience machine---radical agency disproves the pleasure principle.

Deena Mousa 24. Chief of Staff, Global Health and Wellbeing at Open Philanthropy; Features Correspondent, BBC; BA in Ethics, Politics and Economics, Yale University. “'Experience machines': The 1970s thought experiment that speaks to our times.” BBC. 3-24. https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20240321-experience-machines-thought-experiment-that-inspired-matrixs-greatest-question

Similar to the Matrix, Nozick's experience machine would be able to provide the person plugged into it with any experiences they wanted – like "writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book". No one who entered the machine would remember doing so, or would realise at any point that they were within it. But in Nozick's version, there were no malevolent AIs; it would be "provided by friendly and trustworthy beings from another galaxy". If you knew all that, he asked, would you enter the experience machine for the rest of your life?

Nozick proposed that most people would prefer the real world, in spite of the fact that the machine would definitively offer a more pleasurable life

Nozick believed people would not. The thought experiment was intended to demonstrate that reality, or authenticity, has some inherent value to us. While Cypher makes the decision to live in the Matrix when the alternative is continued resistance, Nozick proposed that most people would prefer the real world, in spite of the fact that the machine would definitively offer a more pleasurable life.

To explain this unintuitive answer, Nozick suggested three reasons for our aversion to the experience machine. The first was that "we want to do certain things, and not just have the experience of doing them". The second was that "we want to be a certain way, to be a certain sort of person", and we cannot truly be anything in the experience machine. Finally, Nozick supposed that "plugging into an experience machine limits us to a man-made reality, to a world no deeper or more important than that which people can construct". Through the lack of "contact with any deeper reality," we would lose access to meaning and significance.

#### 4. Deathbed paradox---util is non-transitive.

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On your deathbed, God brings good news. Although, as you already knew, there’s no afterlife in store, he’ll give you a ticket that can be handed to the reaper, good for an additional year of happy life on Earth. As you celebrate, the devil appears and asks, ‘Won’t you accept a small risk to get something vastly better? Trade that ticket for this one: it’s good for 10 years of happy life, with probability 0.999.’ You accept, and the devil hands you a new ticket. But then the devil asks again, ‘Won’t you accept a small risk to get something vastly better? Trade that ticket for this one: it is good for 100 years of happy life—10 times as long—with probability 0.999 [to the] 2—just 0.1% lower.’ An hour later, you’ve made 50,000 trades. (The devil is a fast talker.) You find yourself with a ticket for 10 [to the] 50,000 years of happy life that only works with probability 0.999 [to the] 50,000, less than one chance in 10 [to the] -21. Predictably, you die that very night.

Here are the deals you could have had along the way:

[Table Omitted]

On the one hand, each deal seems better than the one before. Accepting each deal immensely increases the payoff that’s on the table (increasing the number of happy years by a factor of 10) while decreasing its probability by a mere 0.1%. It seems unreasonably timid to reject such a deal. On the other hand, it seems unreasonably reckless to take all of the deals—that would mean trading the certainty of a really valuable payoff for all but certainly no payoff at all. So even though it seems each deal is better than the one before, it does not seem that the last deal is better than the first.1

In this paper, we develop a general version of this paradox and then explore different ways of resolving it. In short, every theory of the value of uncertain prospects must be timid, reckless, or non-transitive. Timid theories permit passing up an arbitrarily large increase in the size of a payoff to prevent a tiny decrease in its probability. Reckless theories recommend sacrificing a sure thing, no matter how good, for an arbitrarily tiny chance of enormous gain.2 And non-transitive theories deny the principle that, if A is better than B and B is better than C, then A must be better than C.

#### Debating skepticism is valuable for learning how to defend our moral beliefs and defeating it requires a positive proof for the objective validity of an ethical system.

**Copp 91**, Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the University of California, Davis. (David, “Moral Skepticism” Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition, June 1991, Vol. 62, No. 3, pp. 203-233, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/4320208.pdf>) rose

Moral skepticism, in one form or another, is endemic in modern society. This is a sociological claim, and my evidence for it is entirely anecdotal.10 I shall simply report that, in my experience, skepticism about ethics is common among thoughtful people, including intellectuals, and academics in fields other than moral philosophy." It is sufficiently common often to be taken for granted in casual philosophical discussions, and often to be a background assumption in politics and public administration where secularism and rationality tend to be associated with technical and economic methods of policy analysis. By contrast, moral argument in politics is often regarded as "soft" and "emotional". Analogous comments could hardly be made about the cultural prominence of skepticism regarding the external world.

It might be replied that almost all of the people who express skeptical views about morality also have deeply held moral attitudes. According to certain strong cognitivist interpretations of moral atti- tudes, whereby it is not possible to have a moral attitude without believing that some corresponding moral standard is justified, it fol- lows that such people have inconsistent beliefs. Now I do not find this form of cognitivism to be plausible, for I believe that skepticism leaves subscription to a moral code as an option for an informed and rational person. Still, even if I am wrong, it does not follow that skepti- cism is incorrect. It does follow, for instance, that people who are morally opposed to capital punishment cannot consistently accept the defining thesis of skepticism. But they have a choice between their skepticism and their moral belief. One option they have is to keep the skeptical belief and continue to oppose capital punishment, yet give up the claim that capital punishment is morally wrong. And even if they decided that they would prefer to give up the skeptical belief, they may not see how to give it up, for they may not see how any moral standard could have an objective justification.

Moral skepticism should be of moral concern to us. For even if, on the positive side, skepticism leaves subscription to a moral code as an option for an informed and rational person, still, on the negative side, it leaves the abandonment of subscription to any moral standard as an option for a rational and informed person, except in special circum- stances such as I discussed above, where subscription would be ration- ally required. In addition, amoralism seems to be a psychological possibility, at least for some people. Not that we should expect to be flooded with amoralists unless we defeat skepticism, for not even the skeptic need be amoral. But she may be, and the thought that no morality has an objective justification, and that amoralism is an option, may lead one to amoralism, especially if the going morality conflicts strongly with one's self-interest, or personal or family advantage.

In this respect too, moral skepticism is unlike skepticism about the external world, for whatever the epistemological skeptic says about our knowledge of the world, he perforce acts largely as we presume that he would otherwise act. His life belies his profession of skepticism and shows that epistemological skepticism is not a serious issue outside the philosophy classroom.12 Lack of belief in the external world is not an option."3

The moral skepticism we find in secular society is not argument driven. I believe people are led to it more by a lack of understanding of how moral skepticism could fail to be true, than by any positive argument in its favor. For example, scientific disagreement can be squared with standard realist and instrumentalist conceptions of science. But secular culture does not furnish an equally standard or plausible non-skeptical and non-religious conception of morality, which is both compatible with a scientifically informed view of the world and with which moral disagreement can be squared. We have few intellectual resources to rely on, when we find the justification of our moral convictions challenged by someone who disagrees with us at a fundamental level. There are philosophical theories that would fill the gap, but they would have to be supported by argument. To defeat moral skepticism, it must be attacked at its roots, and for this, an adequate non-skeptical conception of morality must be established.