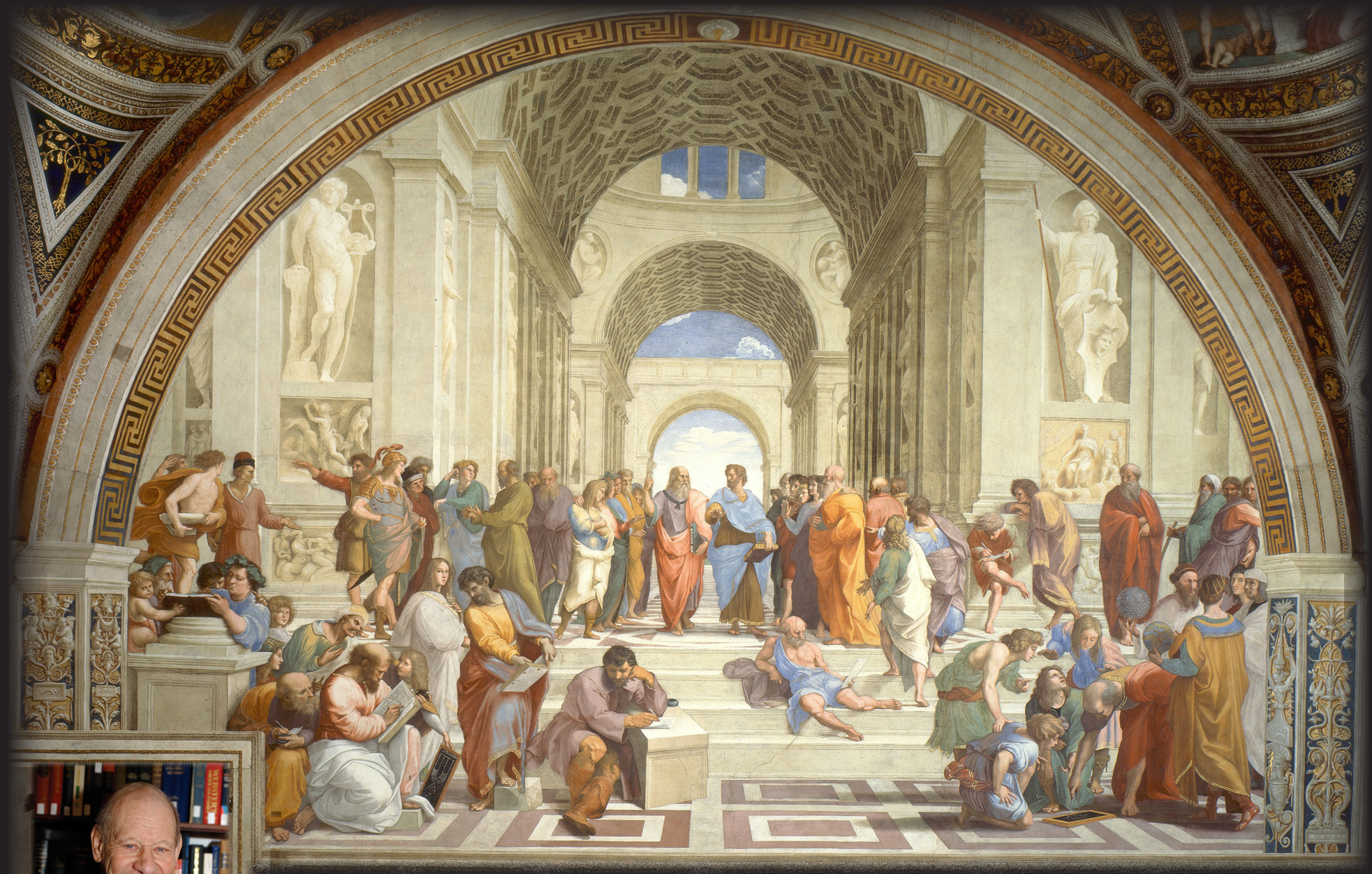

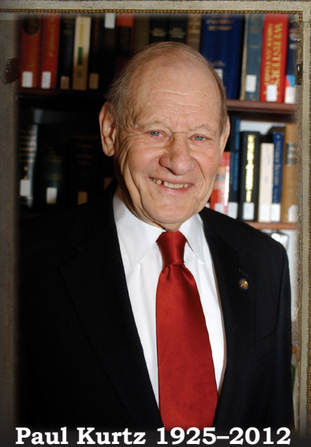

Paul Kurtz 1925–2012

The Exuberant Skepticism of Paul Kurtz

By Justin Clark

Skepticism is an integral part of how I view the world, informing my opinions, actions, and commitments. I've learned a lot from the great modern skeptics over the years, such as James Randi, Penn & Teller, and Martin Gardner. While their efforts to take on flim-flam have greatly improved the public discourse, they often come with a negative perception. Skeptics like Randi were pegged with the "debunker" label, curmudgeonly in tone and flippant towards the "true believers" of the paranormal. This is true in some sense, as Randi's stridency was a part of his brand (which many of us found charming). Nevertheless, skeptics like the astronomer and science communicator Carl Sagan cultivated a completely different form of skepticism, based less in debunking the supernatural and more on explaining the wonder of the natural world.

One modern skeptic that found a balance between Randi's passion and Sagan's positivity was the late philosopher Paul Kurtz. A co-founder of the Committee for the Skeptical Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) and the Center for Inquiry (CFI), Kurtz played a pivotal role in the modern skeptic movement. He wrote many essays and books expounding on his view of skepticism and how it fit into his broader philosophy of secular humanism. The book *Exuberant Skepticism*, a collection of his writings across three decades, gives readers an excellent introduction to his ideas. In these essays, Kurtz defends a skepticism based on rigorous scientific investigation, openness to new ideas, and an optimistic outlook about the future of humanity. In an era of close-minded, reactionary secularists like Sam Harris, I found it refreshing to read Kurtz's insights, as they represent a forward-thinking and non-dogmatic approach to science, skepticism, and philosophy. In this survey of the book, we'll highlight some of Kurtz's most valuable concepts. I hope you come away encouraged to read his work and learn from his example.

Three Forms of Skepticism

A skeptic, broadly outlined, is "one who is willing to question any claim to truth, asking for clarity in definition, consistency in logic, and adequacy of evidence," with the act of skepticism being

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"the intractable foe of pretentious belief systems" (p. 13). That being said, not all forms of skepticism are alike. Throughout the book, Kurtz refers to three essential forms of skepticism: nihilistic skepticism, mitigated skepticism, and skeptical inquiry.

Nihilistic skepticism is one "mired in unlimited doubt, from which it never emerges" (p. 14). This form rejects all types of knowledge or even *attempts* at knowledge, arguing for an unbridgeable gap between ourselves and the outside world (or even the existence of the outside world itself). In ethics, this results in complete moral relativism, with no universal, common standards of moral action. Thus, skeptical nihilists "may become conservative traditionalists. If there are no reliable guides to moral conduct, then the only recourse is to follow custom " (p. 15).

We see this tendency within the worst aspects of the so-called "New Atheism," with the supposed "skeptics" taking moral and political stances that are wildly at odds with their supposed liberal or "centrist" politics, such as anti-immigration, intolerance of religious minorities, anti-LGBTQ+ rights, and so on. As an example, Armoured Skeptic, a well-known YouTube personality, fell for the conspiracy theory that ISIS was involved in the Notre Dame fire in 2019, even though no evidence suggested that this was the case. Skeptics such as this only fall in line with this sort of canard if it reaffirms their moral preferences, like an intolerance of Muslims.

Kurtz rejects this kind of skepticism as "self-contradictory," arguing that "in affirming that no knowledge is possible, these skeptics have already made an assertion" (p. 15). Their skepticism, in effect, becomes a form of "dogmatism; for in resolutely rejecting the very possibility of knowledge or value, such skeptics are themselves introducing their own questionable assertions (p. 15). In flatly rejecting any claim to knowledge, the nihilistic skeptic is making an assertion that no knowledge is possible, even though you can't affirm this position and must reject it outright, per their logic. Thus, this kind of skepticism falls in on itself and doesn't really deserve to be taken seriously.

Mitigated skepticism is a vast improvement on nihilistic skepticism. It can also be called Humean Skepticism, as it is most associated with the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume. This skepticism also rejects any "ultimate reliability of knowledge claims" but argues that "we are forced by the exigencies of practical life to develop viable generalizations and to make choices" (p. 17). As Hume so pithily said in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, "Be a philosopher; but, amidst all your philosophy, be still a man." This doesn't mean that Hume would have us shy away from tough philosophical questions or complicated readings; rather, he wants us to have a balanced appetite for life, enjoying time with friends as well as contemplating the complexities of existence. Hence, the "mitigated" in mitigated skepticism.

The most influential aspect of mitigated skepticism has arguably been in ethics, with the concept known as the "problem of induction," or the "is/ought distinction." Put simply, you can't derive an ought from an is. Now, what does this mean? It means that you can not infer what you ought to do (normative) simply from what something is (descriptive). The fact that a dog exists doesn't tell whether you should love it or care for it. Ignoring this distinction has led to some of the most egregious moral actions in history, from eugenics and concentration camps to slavery and segregation. Instead, mitigated skepticism views morality as "contingent on the sentiments of men and women who agree to abide by social convention in order to satisfy their multifarious desires as best they can" (p. 17). Nature informs how we should act, but it doesn't *determine* it.

Coincidentally, some intellectuals have committed the is/ought mistake while simultaneously arguing that they aren't. Cue Sam Harris and his book, *The Moral Landscape*. As Jonas Čeika has eloquently detailed in his video on the subject, Harris smuggles in his moral presuppositions (pleasure is preferable to pain, health is preferable to sickness) while stating them as objective "facts" that can be discernible with our interrogation of nature. Ignore the fact that sometimes pain is preferable to pleasure, as in when you strenuously exercise to achieve a better physical state, Harris's view is nothing more than a simplified form of utilitarianism parading itself around as a new moral "science." A scientifically-informed utilitarianism is not something to reject outright, but Harris's flippancy towards the is/ought distinction, even when he tries to address it directly, is something to acknowledge. Had Harris taken Hume and mitigated skepticism more seriously, he wouldn't have made such a basic mistake.

Despite its obvious improvements over nihilistic skepticism, mitigated skepticism still leaves inquirers with only a partial attempt at creating knowledge, as its foundations are ultimately subjective. Kurtz believes that this conclusion is incorrect, as the "mitigated skeptics at the very least recognize that there are principles of prudential rationality and pragmatic effectiveness that they appeal to in order to guide policy, and these are not based solely upon taste and sentiment" (p. 117).

Finally, the form of skepticism that Kurtz identifies as the most helpful is "skeptical inquiry," a form of "selective or contextual skepticism" that doesn't take the Humean approach or the nihilistic approach to

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knowledge (p. 19). Skeptical inquiry is a broadly scientific outlook, testing hypotheses and arriving at tentative conclusions based on the best available evidence. But it need not only focus on descriptive questions, says Kurtz. It can, in fact, interrogate ethical and political questions. This skepticism is also "not dogmatic, for it holds that we should never by a priori rejection close the door to any kind of responsible investigation. Thus it is skeptical of dogmatic or narrow-minded atheism and aparanormalism" (p. 19).

This point in crucial to understanding Kurtz's view of skepticism. Atheism in this sense is an outgrowth of skepticism, not the other way around. It is an atheism that isn't afraid to challenge the basic assumptions of nonbelief in the acquisition of potential knowledge. If credible evidence were to come to light proving the existence of God, ghosts, or anything currently deemed paranormal, then we as skeptics should accept those conclusions into the canon of acceptable knowledge. Having said that, the paranormalists must also be open to the possibility that they are wrong and change their positions accordingly. This is the proper attitude towards claims of the theistic, paranormal, or supernatural. Kurtz's lack of belief in the claims made in defense of these views isn't an outright rejection, but an investigated conclusion that is subject to revision. In my estimation, this is the most intellectually-honest position to take on these questions, whether you fall on one side of the debate or the other.

Paul Kurtz's "skeptical inquiry" is, in his words, "outgrowth of pragmatism . . . more in tune with the demands of everyday knowledge that with speculative philosophy" (p. 19-20). This is certainly the case. Kurtz was a student of the American Pragmatist philosopher Sidney Hook, who was himself a student of one of the giants of Pragmatism, John Dewey. This great tradition traces its roots to Charles Sanders Peirce, who challenged Descartes's commitment to universal doubt by arguing that doubt is specific, conditional, and contextual. As Kurtz elaborates, "for the pragmatist it is directly related to an existential problematic situation in which our behavior is blocked and our habits thrown into question" (p.24). We inquire not simply to satisfy our curiosity, but to solve problems. The universal doubt of Descartes or the skepticism of Hume are not robust enough to adequately produce knowledge. They are divorced from the tangible needs of people within a complex society.

To handle this complexity, Kurtz defends what he calls the "principle of coduction," a "methodological device employed to coduce a number of explanations of different levels to account for an object or event" (p. 25). We cannot accurately describe or interpret something without a variety of sources of observation and contemplation. For example, to accurately know how to commute to work, you need to know the roads you will take, the laws you must follow, the traffic conditions you experience, and the performance of your car. All of these points of inquiry build to an effective representation of your commute. Not one variable will provide you with all you need to know anymore than accepting everything you experience will. This approach seems highly dialectical to me, showing the influence of Hegel on pragmatism (even if they reject his metaphysics).

In my estimation, Paul Kurtz's evaluation of skepticism is a solid one, definitely attuned to the criticisms of nihilists and rationalists alike. Ever the pragmatist, Kurtz seeks a middle ground between knowing nothing and knowing everything, showing us how knowledge is tentative, based on experience as much as foundational positions, and contingent on a multitude of factors. Skeptical inquiry will provide us with a map of the stars as well as a blueprint for society. It also respectfully

Opening spread: "THE SCHOOL OF ATHENS" (1509-1511) BY RAPHAEL. WIKIPEDIA.

Insert: PHOTOGRAPH OF PAUL KURTZ BY MATT CRAVATTA, WIKIPEDIA COMMONS.

If credible evidence were to come to light proving the existence of God, ghosts, or anything currently deemed paranormal, then we as skeptics should accept those conclusions into the canon of acceptable knowledge.

challenges theism and supernaturalism while staying open to the possibility of their validation. This kind of nuanced view makes Kurtz much more like Carl Sagan and John Dewey than Richard Dawkins and Friedrich Nietzsche, which is why I find it both intellectually engaging as well as temperamentally astute.

Skepticism and Religion

As a skeptic of the supernatural, Kurtz was naturally critical of religion. However, his criticism of religion appears to have been more nuanced than you would imagine. In fact, Kurtz contextualizes and historicizes the role of religion in human life while also critiquing religion's supernatural or mystical aspects.

One crucial position that Kurtz disagrees with is the "Non-Overlapping Magisteria" hypothesis of paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould, wherein science explains the natural world, religion explains the ethical world, and the two are mutually exclusive. In fact, Kurtz believes that religion and ethics should be separate to begin with. As he writes, "Religionists have no special competence in framing moral judgements." He further reminds the reader that numerous philosophers,"from Aristotle to Spinoza, Kant, John Stuart Mill, and John Dewey... demonstrate that ethics can be autonomous and that it is possible to frame ethical judgements on the basis of rational inquiry" (p. 107). This position is credible in my estimation. It goes without saying that religious thinkers throughout all of human history have been moral teachers, from Christ to the Buddha, but they don't completely own the ethical marketplace. I think it is safe to assume that all fields of human knowledge, including philosophy, religion, and science, can inform our moral lives. Siloing ethical thought only to religion would be a mistake, a disservice to both moral inquiry and religious belief.

While Kurtz rejects Gould's position, he actually does believe in some form of compatibility between science and religion. His "controversial thesis" on the role of religion rejects its descriptive and prescriptive elements but affirms its "evocative, expressive, and emotive" qualities. For him, religion "presents moral poetry, aesthetic inspiration, performative ceremonial rituals, which act out and dramatize the human condition and human interests, and seek to slake the thirst for meaning and purpose." In this sense, religion can maintain its spirituality without any belief in the supernatural—something that appeals to secular religionists around the world. He sums up this view beautifully by writing, "If science gives us truth; mortality, the good and the right; and politics, justice, religion is the realm of promise and expectation" (p. 108-109).

I am deeply moved by Kurtz's view of religion. As a secular humanist interested in Buddhism, I too believe in the value of his four fundamental realms of human endeavor: science, ethics, politics, and religion. I just do not subscribe to beliefs in the supernatural, as they do not conform to our understanding of the natural world via science. Nevertheless, scientific naturalism can leave a person cold, as it is quite good at pointing out "the tragic character of the human condition" (p. 109). With these considerations in mind, a pragmatic but compelling blend of science, ethics, politics, and religion can bring out the best aspects of our lives. Humanism can fill that role as much as Christianity or Buddhism can, in that it ultimately expresses a positive and hopeful view of our human future. In this regard, "religion" becomes less of a belief system and more of a viewpoint of human possibility.

If Kurtz were alive today, he would be appalled by the myopic musings of fundamentalist atheists and certainly wouldn't approve of their condescension towards religious belief or religious language. In reality, this viewpoint undermines the very capacity for cultures to embrace a religion devoid of fundamentalism itself, one open to the discoveries of science, the insights of secular ethics, and the values of democratic politics. It also strips the secular life of any meaningful language from religious discourse that could be applied to our own beliefs and commitments. Secular and/or humanist theologies are possible; look no further than two of America's most prescient African-American intellectuals: Anthony Pinn and Cornel West. Pinn, a former liberation theologian who embraced secular humanism, has written eloquently on the potential of "humanist theology." West's excellent book, *Democracy Matters*, contains a chapter that outlines such a course of religious renewal in America, one firmly rooted in democratic humanism and a rejection of fundamentalism. This path provides us with the potentialities of human solidarity, where we shrug off esoteric differences and embrace our universal values. Kurtz's views on religion provide profound insights for those potentialities.

The "New Skepticism"

In the final chapter of the collection, Paul Kurtz outlines his principles as they relate to what he calls the "New Skepticism"—a term he uses to designate skeptical inquiry from nihilistic skepticism. Thus, the New Skepticism rests on being "positive and constructive; its principles are essential for the development of knowledge about nature and human behavior" (p. 226). Being constructive, not merely critical, was at the heart of Kurtz's view of skepticism. As he further notes, skeptical inquirers "do not reject any claim to knowledge a priori; however, they insist that the claim be framed in testable form and that the burden of proof rests primarily with the person asserting the claim" (p. 226). There's a humility in this view of skepticism. Gone is the simplistic view of "debunking" beliefs or supposed "facts" about reality and in its stead is the serious evaluation of claims and an openness to be proven wrong.

In my estimation, Paul Kurtz's evaluation of skepticism is a solid one, definitely attuned to the criticisms of nihilists and rationalists alike.

Another essential element of the New Skepticism is its commitment to science, reason, and ethical inquiry. Kurtz believed strongly that science and reason were excellent pathways for human development and potential, not just for what we can learn but how we can be better to one another. "Rationality can be used to develop and test ethical principles, moral values, and social politics, and thus contribute to goodness and happiness," he notes (p. 227). Ethics cannot be, and should not be exclusively handled by the faithful. Secular humanists play an important role in the development of a global, cosmopolitan, and multicultural ethical framework. Science on its own cannot improve our lives; only by harnessing the advancements of science can we "alleviate suffering and reduce pain, as well as ameliorate and enhance human happiness" (p. 226).

With politics, the New Skepticism encourages the skeptical and scientific worldviews as a way to "solve problems, reduce hatred, neutralize animosities, and negotiate differences" (p. 226). This fits neatly with a cosmopolitan and Enlightenment-influenced dedication to human rights, the rule of law, pluralism, and tolerance. Regardless of whatever political aims we seek to achieve, they must be rooted in common empathy and understanding of others. This only happens with an open mind. The skeptics who peddle in brashness and polemics have their place, especially as it relates to exposing corruption and harm, but they cannot adequately present a politics of hope and optimism. That's the "new" of this New Skepticism — to call out harmful beliefs and practices but do so in a manner that advances humanistic ideals within a political culture.

The New Skepticism seeks a break with past traditions, integrating the tools of critical inquiry with the ethical imperatives of humanism. No longer is it good enough to simply point out what's wrong; we must also articulate what is right. This means coupling a certain level of vulnerability with a lack of gullibility. When we hear someone make a claim, we need to challenge their claim but not their basic humanity. Additionally, we shouldn't be afraid to embrace science while also criticizing scientists and scientific studies, or trusting institutions when they are deserving of trust. Only then can humankind really find a better path forward.

Conclusion: Eupraxsophy and Eupraxsophers

In order to properly describe what he sought to develop for secular humanists, Paul Kurtz coined the term "eupraxsophy" (meaning "good, practical wisdom") and called those who lived by these principles "eupraxsophers." According to Kurtz:

> Eupraxsophers will concentrate on two tasks: (1) They will seek *sophia*, or wisdom, a summing up in a synoptic view of what the most reliable knowledge of the day tells us about nature and humankind. (2) They will also be concerned with *eupraxia*, that is, with *eu* (good) and *praxis* (conduct)—succinctly, good conduct. They will, in other words, attempt to draw the normative implications of *sophia* for living our practical life (p. 156-157).

Eupraxsophers are as dedicated to action as they are to inquiry, applying their knowledge with an ethical dedication to human flourishing. As Kurtz puts it, "our eupraxia — the things that we consider worthwhile — is related to our cosmic *sophia* — our understanding of the universe in which we live" (p. 157). Eupraxsophy is

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a synthesis of all of Kurtz's most important ideas: skeptical inquiry, scientific investigation, secularism, and ethical values. Thinkers such as John Dewey, Sidney Hook, and Bertrand Russell were all eupraxsophers in Kurtz's view. Today, thinkers such as Martin Hägglund, Elizabeth Anderson, and the aforementioned Anthony Pinn carry on Kurtz's tradition, combining philosophical insight with moral clarity.

While eupraxsophy thrives on a diversity of knowledge and ethical thought, one overriding axiom underlies its application: a devotion to hope. We will encounter immense challenges throughout our lives, often with feelings of nihilism, despair, and anxiety. Eupraxsophy calls on us to maintain optimism, to believe fervently that "life is good, or can be good, and that living is better than dying" (p. 159). This is easier said than done, of course, as our material situations often dictate how our lives will proceed, but we should nevertheless attempt to try out hope, for there is virtue in trying. This is why skepticism and knowledge are incredibly important, for "the justification for knowing is found in the process of living, in helping us to cope with the obstacles that confront us" (p. 160-161). Instead of falling back into dogmatism and cynicism, eupraxsophy urges us to step forward and embrace our challenges with grace and kindness.

In this sense, Paul Kurtz's skepticism is so much more than debunking the supernatural or fact-checking dubious claims. It is a powerful tool used in the service of improving ourselves, the lives of others, our societies, and our planet. It is rooted in the Enlightenment tradition of Immanuel Kant, who encouraged us to "sapere aude," or "dare to know." We often focus on the "know" part of that phrase, as cliches abound on the importance of knowledge ("knowledge is power," "knowledge is half the battle," etc.). Yet, Kurtz's skepticism also homes in on the value of daring, how seeking knowledge can not only give us the correct answer but can give us a better life. We should dare to know — with all of the successes and failures we'll find along the way — because that's what makes life worth living. TS

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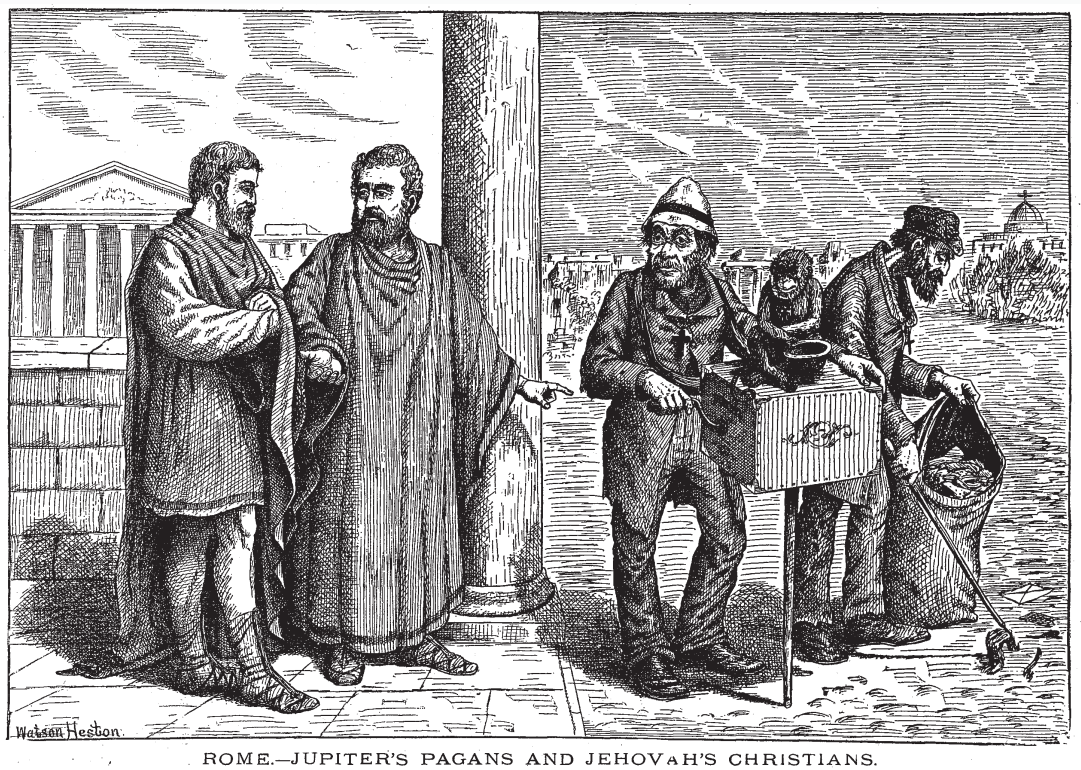

ROME.—JUPITER'S PAGANS AND JEHOVAH'S CHRISTIANS.

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