

## The critical attitude

The Cranky Professor

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Mark Mercer

Department of Philosophy

Saint Mary's University

Halifax, NS B3H 3C3

(902) 420-5825

[mark.mercer@smu.ca](mailto:mark.mercer@smu.ca)

Believe according to the strength of your evidence. Fair enough. But isn't the hard part really to collect and evaluate the evidence? Once I have the evidence and I've evaluated it, I'll conform my belief to its strength. That's no problem. But how am I to collect and evaluate evidence?

That is indeed a hard and important question. Even more, by answering it, we will discover that epistemic responsibility hardly at all requires us to believe only according to evidence. Rationality, it turns out, has little to do with what we believe or with what degree of confidence we believe it. So far from having to do with believing according to evidence, epistemic responsibility consists merely in maintaining a critical attitude toward one's beliefs. A critical attitude—that's what will serve us well, both in our practical projects and in our desire to understand things as they are.

To begin, notice that any universal proposition, any proposition that all things of some sort have some characteristic or that no things of some sort do, can never be conclusively verified. We simply cannot survey all the things the proposition concerns. Worse still for the view that epistemic responsibility consists in conforming one's beliefs to the evidence, is that no positive instance of the generalization is any bit of confirmation at all. For a positive instance to be confirming evidence, we have to suppose that nature is uniform. But since our evidence that nature is uniform is just the positive instances we've collected so far of the generalizations we hold, our argument that nature is uniform will be circular and, thus, not a justifying argument at all.

The lesson here is that inductive reasoning is not justificatory reasoning. Noting patterns and correlations might suggest generalizations to us, but it does not in the least justify our believing those generalizations. You are no more reasonable, given your evidence, in believing that the next time you shake salt over your peas the salt will fall than you would be in believing instead that the salt will rise.

No number of positive instances shows your belief to be warranted. And yet—just one counter-instance shows it to be false. You believe that whenever salt is shaken over peas salt will fall on them, and this belief generates in you the expectation that the next time you shake salt over your peas salt will fall on them. Should your expectation be borne out in the course of events, you are, as we have seen, no more justified in believing your generalization than you were before. But should your expectation not be borne out, you would be well justified in believing your generalization false. If you continue to believe your generalization, you are believing falsely.

The key to being epistemically responsible, then, is to be concerned to eliminate your errors. Forget about seeking the truth. Seek instead to identify and remove errors. And the key to identifying errors is to maintain a critical attitude toward your thoughts and ideas, to hold them open to criticism and empirical refutation. Fashion your ideas so that they imply observable consequences, so that they imply that if such-and-such occurs, this particular state of affairs will obtain. Then watch out for such-and-such occurring (better, make it happen yourself). If that particular state of affairs does not obtain, then there you go—your idea is false.

Through the process of error elimination we develop more refined, more general, and more deeply explanatory ideas about how things are. In doing so, our understandings of things improve. Our understandings will, of course, remain conjectural, hypothetical, still open to refutation, but that should not bother us. Whatever errors our understandings contain, we are able, in principle, to identify and eliminate them, too.

For one whose attitude is critical, wishful believing is not something to be much concerned about. That a belief derives from a desire or wish is neither here nor there—no more than that it derives from noticing patterns. What matters is that our beliefs, however acquired or sustained, are put to the test, either by criticism in light of other things we believe or in experience.

What we are to be concerned about is dogmatism, both our own and that which marks others in our society generally. To be dogmatic is to hold that whatever happens next, it won't refute or even trouble what one already believes. Whatever happens, it can be explained away in a manner consistent with what one already believes. Dogmatic people don't look for disconfirming instances, for, they believe, there are none, but they do enjoy confirming instances, thinking that confirmation justifies their belief.

We are all, of course, to some degree dogmatic, though some of us are more dogmatic than others. Dogmatism brings psychological and social rewards. Acquiring and maintaining a critical attitude, on the other hand, is difficult and potentially isolating. Still, the hardships are worth it, if one wants to solve problems or to reach a fuller understanding of things.

Because acquiring and maintaining a critical attitude is difficult, it needs strong institutional support. The primary institution in our society for inculcating and nurturing critical attitudes is the university. "Here is my idea," says the professor. "Now tell me what is wrong with it. Then go away and fashion a better idea, one that preserves what is good in my idea but corrects what is wrong. I will then criticize your idea." In the course of three or four years, and with luck, the student will have acquired the ability to make her way in the wider world as a confident and committed critical thinker, and she and we will all be better for it.