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The truth, but not yet: Avoiding naïve skepticism via explicit communication of metadisciplinary aims (0445)

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Abstract: Introductory students regularly endorse *naïve skepticism*—doubt about the existence and universality of truth—for a variety of unsupported or uncritical reasons. Though some of the reasons for students' skepticism can be traced back to the student—for example, a desire to avoid engaging with controversial material or a desire to avoid offense—*naïve skepticism* is also the result of how introductory courses are taught. Such courses deemphasize the search for truth in order to promote students' abilities to engage in basic metadisciplinary aims because placing the search for truth at the forefront would essentially impede students' abilities to develop necessary disciplinary skills. Drawing from extant philosophical literature on *naïve skepticism*, I argue that we can make progress against *naïve skepticism* by clearly discussing how metadisciplinary aims differ at the disciplinary and course levels in a way that is meaningful, reinforced, and accessible.

Introductory students are definitionally novices with no assumed disciplinary background. Thus, how to successfully engage in disciplinary practice is a regular feature of many introductory courses. Such engagement regularly requires examination of controversial or unsettled normative claims (Burkard, 2017). This engagement—coupled with students' psychological predispositions (Goodwin & Darley, 2008, 2010, 2012; Heiphertz & Young, 2017; Sarkissian, Park, Tien, Cole Wright, & Knobe, 2011), commitments to social behaviors like avoiding offense (Delaney, 2004; Erion, 2005; Irvine, 2000; Lewis, 2015; Momeyer, 1995), and a desire to avoid critically examining long-held fundamental assumptions (Booth, 2006; Erion, 2005; Lewis, 2015; Momeyer, 1995; Satris, 1986)—motivates *naïve skepticism*, the uncritical rejection of universal truth.

Though mature, well-developed skepticism (e.g., theories like those offered in (Mackie, 1977), (Ayer, 1952), (Cartwright, 1983) or (van Fraassen, 1980)) are not automatically unreasonable, *naïve skepticism* interferes with students' ability to engage both with disciplinary content and the world at large. While we as instructors have a duty to combat *naïve skepticism*, it has proven distressingly robust, in no small part because the way we teach at the introductory level makes students more likely to embrace *naïve skepticism*, rather than abandon it (Besong, 2016; Booth, 2006; Momeyer, 1995; Tait et al., 2012). I argue that we can make progress combatting *naïve skepticism* by explicitly discussing the metadisciplinary goals of the course and the discipline at large—as well as how these goals come apart at the introductory level—in a way that is meaningful, regular, and accessible.

For nearly all disciplines, one of the most central goals of the discipline is the search for truth. For example, truth plays such a central role in philosophy that, as Glanzberg (2016) notes, a coherent survey of literature on the subject is essentially impossible. However, truth is rarely the only metadisciplinary goal, especially at the introductory level where more rudimentary metadisciplinary aims (e.g., metacognitive skill development (Stokes, 2012) and the fundamentals of disciplinary practice (Burkard, 2017; Cashmore, 2015; Turner, 2013)) may play a more central role. Often, the development of these more fundamental skills are developed by ‘teaching the debate’ and presenting each plausible alternative in the best possible light and letting the student decide.

Such a strategy has a number of benefits, including sensitivity to power dynamics (Tait et al., 2012), encouragement of threshold concept mastery, and modeling good disciplinary practice (Besong, 2016; Gregory, 2007). However, teaching the debate encourages naïve skepticism by presenting successful practice of the discipline as disconnected from truth (Booth, 2006; Erion, 2005; Tait et al., 2012).

Unfortunately, we cannot address naïve skepticism via direct frontal assault—as has been suggested (Hood, 2006; Paden, 1987, 1994; Satris, 1986; Talbot, 2012)—by arguing against skepticism as a meaningful theory. First, as has been established by a number of reasonable skeptical views, skepticism is not by itself unreasonable. Second, without a firm theoretical grounding, students are likely unable to distinguish sophisticated motivations for skepticism from naïve motivations.

Another way of addressing this encouragement of naïve skepticism would be to abandon teaching the debate as a pedagogical strategy. But to do so would mean abandoning the good-making features of this strategy. Instead, I suggest that naïve skepticism can be mitigated by explicitly discussing how the metadisciplinary aims of both the discipline and the course differ in a way that is meaningful, regular, and accessible.

The main feature of this strategy is that discussion of metaphilosophical aims must be *meaningful*, dedicating a significant portion of the course to a discussion of not only the discipline’s aims, but the aims of the course and how those aims may come apart over the semester. Such discussion can not only be used to clarify how the successful development of foundational skills requires sidelining the search for truth, but also allows for discussion of the root causes of naïve skepticism. For example, we can use a discussion of successful disciplinary practice to outline how such practice embraces respectful, tolerant disagreement.

It is vital that this meaningful discussion is regularly *reinforced*, especially with respect to how disciplinary and course aims come apart. For example, essays give a vital opportunity for such reinforcement; the standards by which we evaluate introductory essays are often entirely reflective of the foundational skills we seek to develop in students, rather than the accuracy of their conclusions. To again use philosophy as an example, whether a student writes a paper concluding God exists or that God does not exist is, at a certain level, immaterial. What matters is whether the essay is an example of good philosophy that presents clear, well-supported arguments.

Finally, it is vital that the discussion of metadisciplinary aims is *accessible* to students. Because one of the root causes of naïve skepticism is material that is controversial and unsettled, consideration of unfamiliar questions in novel fields of study via a teach-the-debate strategy will naturally draw students towards such skepticism. However, casting the introductory course as an attempt to develop foundational skills similar to musical exercises or athletic practice, along with their distinction from actual musical or athletic performance, can help students see their work at the introductory level as vital to successful disciplinary practice while remaining distinct from disciplinary mastery that ideally encompasses the full gamut of metadisciplinary goals.

In conclusion, students are at risk of endorsing naïve skepticism both because of commitments they bring with them to introductory classes and because of how we teach such classes. I have argued that such skepticism can be mitigated by engaging in meaningful, reinforced, accessible discussion with students that addresses the metadisciplinary aims of both the discipline itself and the course.

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