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## Why We Need Skepticism | Dallas Willard

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### The Veritas Forum

In the modern age, skepticism is often equated with intelligence. But is there room for belief in the contemporary mind? At a Veritas Forum from Claremont, the late philosopher Dallas Willard discusses both the dangers and benefits of doubt in our society.

### Transcript

Truth is scary on our campuses today, and there are good reasons for it. But on the other hand, it's really impossible to stay away from truth because it is so central to life. The late Dallas Willard had a profound ability to marry robust scholarship with compassionate spiritual insight.

A philosophy professor at USC for 47 years. He cherished the study and pursuit of inquiry. Dallas believed that through honest questioning, we enable our limited perspective to expand into something more meaningful, more fulfilling, and hopefully more true.

At a Veritas Forum from Claremont, Dallas discusses the role of skepticism in shaping the people we are becoming.

[Music] [Applause] Thank you for causing my life to flash before my eyes. Thank you very much.

I'm delighted to be here. And I've been looking forward to addressing a topic that I think is really very important and not well understood. That is what is skepticism good for.

And I thought I would just tell you upfront what it's good for. There are two main things, and hopefully as I go through my talk, you'll be able to follow that. There are two main things that skepticism is good for, and one is to undermine illegitimate claims to authority.

And that has been historically one of the really vital things that skepticism has done, and

we'll talk more about that. The second thing is it initiates inquiry. It stimulates inquiry.

And given the human condition, a little stimulation in that respect is often very much needed. And I must say I'm a little bit worried about our campuses because I'm afraid the spirit of inquiry is not as strong as it should be, and perhaps as it once was. So those are the two things now that skepticism is good for, and let me try to unfold all of this and help you think out that topic.

And we're going to have questions in a little while, and if you have problems, the hard questions are the best ones, so be sure and write them down, and you'll have a chance to work with them as we go along. Just a word about veritas. Veritas is a Latin word for truth, and everything sounds better in Latin.

And in fact, if they had advertised a truth forum, probably a lot of people here wouldn't have come. Truth is scary on our campuses today, and there are good reasons for it. But on the other hand, it's really impossible to stay away from truth because it is so central to life.

So let's begin by looking at a description of truth in our next slide, and we're not going to try to be philosophically too profound tonight. You can do that when we come to the questions. But basically a thought or statement is true if what it is about is, as that thought or statement represents it.

Snow is white. That statement is true if snow is white. To use the Hackney philosophical example.

You have gas in your tank. That statement is true if you have gas in your tank. We can't split and start all the philosophical hairs on that, but this is a very simple thing, and truth itself is simple.

It's very simple. Children pick it up quickly, and they pick up false and quickly, and they might not be able to give you a statement of it, but this is what they learn. You have promised to take them to Disneyland.

That is true if you take them to Disneyland. If not, it's Daddy, Mommy, you said, and they understand very quickly what truth is. It's very simple.

Children pick it up quickly. However scary it may be, we really can't drop the word. It's just too simple to life.

We can't use the Latin word to help us out, and we have to still keep talking about truth. For many years I served on the accreditation committees for WASC, the Western Association of Schools and Colleges. The very first standard in the WASC handbook says this.

An institution of higher education is by definition dedicated to the search for truth and its dissemination. The statement goes on to discuss that, says among other things, those within an educational institution have as the first concern, knowledge, evidence, and truth. Now here's why I'm worried about this issue.

I've served on how many site committees, and never once was there a discussion about truth. There's a discussion about how many books were in the library, how much time faculty spent with students, and so on. But never once a discussion about this central issue.

Truth has become an ominous topic, and we want to try to explain why that is. And partly it is because it is so important. Truth is so important because of its role in life.

I like to use the figure of a sighting mechanism on a rocket or a gun. If the sighting mechanism is true, then if you use it well, you will hit the target. And truth in general is like that.

Truth is what enables us to deal with things that are not right in front of our nose. We are able to sight them and deal with them without seeing them. Now while truth is simple in its nature, truths are often exasperatingly complicated.

And we have to have a way of dealing with truth that we can't make present to our senses or set before our mind. And that's where evidence and logic comes in. That's why it's so important logic enables us to ascertain truths which we cannot simply bring before us.

And as it turns out, that's an awful lot of our truths. Tax time is coming up and many of you will do your tax returns. And I guarantee you that most of what you put on those returns is not something that you can bring before your mind.

But there is a method. And method is all important in dealing with truth. So truth is simple in itself, kind of threatening, absolutely important.

And for example, on the campus, you're constantly dealing with it. Teachers and students and so on. Supposedly when we grade papers, we're dealing with truth and knowledge in our students.

And hopefully we have a little bit of that ourselves. So it's really important to understand why it's so important that we deal with truth. Veritas for truth form comes out of a situation where truth is in trouble socially and on the campus.

And it attempts to revive an interest and encourage the ability to deal with truth. Now the next slide is the bitterness of truth. Because truth is a bitter pill.

It does not yield to what we want or our feelings. It's totally indifferent to human, well

and desire. And then you put that together with the fact that human desire and will is set on reshaping reality.

And therefore truth to suit itself. So now that's why lying and distortion are so common. And distortion is a large field that allows some people to avoid outright lying.

And yet to evade the truth. I recently had a book given to me on lying in a second nature. Why is it so common? It's been observed you never have to teach a child to lie.

They learn how to do it on their own. Why is it so common? Well it's because reality is so hard to deal with. And people want to shift it and change it.

And so lying becomes second nature. Advertising for example is one of the accepted forms of distortion and often outright lying. Why? Well because someone wants to manipulate you and gets you to do something that you otherwise might not do.

And the bitterness of truth. Now if we can have an next slide. Truth doesn't do as much good without knowledge.

And the connection between truth and knowledge and authority is really important for us to understand. So I put up here again a statement about knowledge. We have knowledge of something when we represent it as it is on an appropriate basis of thought and experience.

Your beliefs can be true without you knowing that they're true. What have we got here? Here we are. I knew it was there.

So we have knowledge of something when we represent it as it is on an appropriate basis of thought and experience. And of course that's why you're here at Claremont. Just to gain knowledge.

And that's what your professors agreed you are and you are ranked by whether or not you have gained knowledge. The real problem here is the phrase appropriate basis. And we have never succeeded in arriving at a general criterion for appropriate basis.

And that is largely due to the fact that what is appropriate depends on the subject matter. Your experience with chemistry is one thing. Your experience with dating is another.

And in both cases you may have some knowledge but I hope you don't get your knowledge of dating by chemistry. It's a different field. And so knowledge is important.

It is crucial to understand why we strive for knowledge. And that is because it allows us to have a basis that we can share with others. Generally speaking knowledge is public.

It is based on method that you can ask others to use and to follow to gain the

knowledge. You don't have a way of others gaining the knowledge that you have and that tends to call in doubt whether or not you have knowledge. But while there is no general criterion in most areas of practice and thought and experience, there are criteria.

Which allow you to know whether or not someone has knowledge. If you are teaching the poetry of Keats for example, you can find out whether or not a student has knowledge in ways that are normal in that field. And that is true of every field.

Now here is the next move. Knowledge brings authority. This is where the tie begins to bind.

Knowledge brings authority. It tends to confer a right and responsibility to act, to direct action, to formulate and supervise implementation of policy and to teach. If you are going to have the rights and responsibility that goes with these, you need to have knowledge and not just to believe.

You need to be in a position to teach on the basis of your understanding of your subject matter that gives you a claim to knowledge. But now then claims to knowledge are not the same as knowledge. And because knowledge is so influential in human life, people tend to claim knowledge they don't have.

And claims to knowledge then become instruments of oppression. So now you can see how the first thing I said about what skepticism is good for begins to come into place. Because when you hear a claim to knowledge that you think is not justified and you see people exercising authority on the basis of their claims to knowledge, that's where it is good to be skeptical.

It is good to raise the question of the basis of the claims of the person who is doing the talking. So next slide from knowledge, then we move to power. Authority institutionalized or vested in individuals tends to drift away from knowledge to power.

Power to harm or hurt, to cause people to do things. There is a social connection with authority that begins to give one even sometimes the right to invoke governmental power, which is in many respects the ultimate kind of force that can be brought to bear. So authority institutionalized or vested in individuals tends to drift away from knowledge.

Knowledge is still in the area of freedom and truth and openness and inquiry. But when a person in power is put in a corner, they want to disregard that and just use the power. Thus it becomes oppressive and it often opposes truth.

Now that's a familiar story isn't it? In human history. Authority opposing truth because it undercuts their power and even opposed to knowledge. That's a, of course, a familiar human story.

Now next slide. That's so harmful because there's something about human life that's extremely important about living with your own thoughts and your own understanding and choices. I think this goes very deep theologically as well as socially and just psychologically.

We're meant to live by our own thoughts and our own convictions, our own insights and feelings. That isn't an easy project, but somehow if you take that away, you crush human life. So authority can blot out this extremely important thing about living from your own thoughts, understandings and choices.

And that's where skepticism comes in. So our next slide is inter-skepticism. Historically and socially a primary role of skepticism has been to break the grip of authority and power.

Social, institutional, sometimes even individually. So there's a great battle now that breaks out here between authority that may or may not be warranted by the knowledge that is claimed and the needs of individuals to live from their own convictions and insights and understandings. It's a question of integrity.

The person who is put in a corner where they have to accept at least outwardly authority that is they don't believe in and they are not based upon legitimate knowledge claims loses their integrity. Or they may have to even give their life to hold on to their integrity. So the first next slide, the first aim that we want to think of is skepticism, is liberation.

Now our history is full of familiar stories about this and I want to say time just by mentioning, for example Galileo and his struggle with authority and the liberation that didn't make it to him, at least in his lifetime, but has come through him to many, many other people. And you could mention all kinds of cases, politically artistic and otherwise, where liberation has been the effect of skepticism that pulled the support from under, the illusion of authority that was crushing the life out of people. The skeptic then becomes a kind of hero and we see a lot of that in our western history and in the present.

Skepticism isn't heroic necessarily, it can be if it is used for a good purpose, but it need not be. So now let me try to just briefly say what skepticism is. Skepticism is an attitude that calls claims to knowledge, knowledge into doubt, calls it into doubt, and gives a working space where people who wish to keep the integrity of their beliefs, but also, as we'll see in a moment, wish to inquire further into the issue that may be coming up.

Now, skepticism can be broader or narrower in scope, but the point is that we do not, or do not necessarily, have knowledge of a certain kind. We may think we do, there may be others who wish us to think we do, or at least to think they do, but that is what is in question. So skepticism is not doubt, though it may be involvement on.

Skepticism is the question, is this really true? Is this really knowledge, and it goes into the details that involve an elaborate system like Galileo calling into question the geocentric system of the solar system. So that involved a lot of hard work, went on for centuries, and that's the nature of skepticism also.

[music] Now, let me give you two kinds of skepticism.

The next is extreme skepticism. Extreme skepticism simply denies there's any knowledge, and you find cases of this in the history of philosophy. And skepticism has been treated at great length by Scotland.

Richard Pocken's book on the history of skepticism between Erasmus and Descartes is a good scholarly source of your interest in it. Extreme skepticism simply denies that there's any knowledge at all. Extreme skepticism tends to be dogmatic, and the reason is because it cannot support itself on knowledge.

It has just denied there is any such thing. And so it tends to be a kind of shrug, kind of an intellectual that. Now, what makes it attractive is it does liberate you, but liberates you into what? And really, it cannot be sustained in ordinary life.

There we are constantly distinguishing between what is known from what is not known, and we do that on a good basis. It simply is not true that there is no knowledge. Actually, knowledge is not rare, and it's not esoteric.

It's very common. Your lives are filled with knowledge, and not just the kind you take a test on and write a paper on. Our ordinary life is guided, mainly by knowledge.

Many times, by beliefs, that we haven't tested, but we could test them. And if we did, we would find out that they were well found in. And so I like to call attention to this form of skepticism, and then set it aside in favor of what I call targeted skepticism.

Targeted skepticism is aimed at a particular area of knowledge, or at specific issues, for example, geocentrism. It's very interesting that targeted skepticism always depends upon some body or range of knowledge. That's what allowed Galileo to come to his view about the sun being the center of the solar system, was knowledge.

And so targeted skepticism is bookended on both ends by knowledge. It runs from knowledge. It didn't have knowledge.

It would never come up. But on the other hand, it runs two knowledge. It seeks knowledge.

Now, it's consistent with taking some areas to be outside of knowledge. And I mention here on the screen, today, morality and religion are often rejected, especially on campuses as areas of knowledge. And especially in the 20th century, they're emerged

both with reference to religion and to morality, something that we sometimes call non-cognitiveism.

Non-cognitiveism, that is, thinking that religious claims cannot constitute knowledge. There's nothing cognitive about it, unobtainable, important, yes, or human life, but not knowledge. And then that same view, famously, was adopted with reference to morality, the idea that when you utter a moral judgment of some kind, someone's a good person or a bad person, some action is right or wrong.

It's just like cheering for what you call is good and booing what you call is long, but there's no cognitive content. They're not true or false. Evidence does not apply, and no one is right or wrong cognitively in those areas.

But I see that's consistent still with targeted skepticism. And actually, it's consistent with targeting skepticism at religion and morality, as we will say a little bit more about this in just a moment. Targeted skepticism seeks evidence and is based upon evidence.

So next screen targeted skepticism can be a path to inquiry. And usually it is for people who engage in this kind of work, whether whatever the field may be, if they have doubts about some theory that is in the field, that may lead them to question the evidence, the theory is based upon, and that in turn can lead them into inquiry that could provide knowledge of the subject matter. So now, I give you this idea of the responsible skeptic.

The responsible skeptic seeks to discover and to know. And that is their objective. Skepticism is for that person, not the in and the in.

That's not what their life and their work is about. They're not trying to evade responsibility. They're trying to be responsible and to bring knowledge out of an area where there perhaps is none at the time.

So now next screen, just in summary, we have these two forms of skepticism. You can call it extreme or dogmatic skepticism. It doesn't lead anywhere.

It's possibly some form of vacuous liberation. But that's all you get out of it. But it doesn't give you anything positive to live by.

It's an evasive tactic. And very often, a young person will slip into this form of pervasive skepticism or extreme skepticism and experience it in a kind of romantic way that gives them a lot of psychological satisfaction and makes them appear to be a dashing fellow or girl in their companionship. Can we go into the next screen? But extreme skepticism shuts off serious inquiry into things that really matter because there's no way forward on extreme skepticism.

If you are targeted, you can find a basis for proceeding with your inquiries and you can make some headways. But that's not true of extreme or dogmatic skepticism. It shuts off



serious inquiry into matters that really matter.

Targeted skepticism, on the other hand, would seem to be an intellectual doozy. It would have virtue about it. And it arises from the need for truth in responsible living, for truth and knowledge in responsible living.

Belief is not enough. It's nice if your beliefs are true. But we all want our beliefs to be based on knowledge, where that's possible.

And that's the best possible basis for belief. Now sometimes belief outruns knowledge and you have to go with what you've got. But it's never preferable that way if you can base your beliefs upon knowledge.

Institutions could, without becoming terribly crushing in their authority, help people come to the place where their beliefs are based upon knowledge. But institutions tend not to do that because they find inquiry threatening. And one of the worst things that happens for young people, especially who are raised in a particular political or religious context, is their encouraged to think that to inquire is itself a kind of treason.

Whereas the only hopeful thing for a young person is to inquire in such a way, as to find out the extent to which their beliefs can be based upon knowledge. Okay, so that's the general lay of the land. Now let me wind up here by talking a few minutes about what we should be skeptical about.

And now I'm talking about targeted skepticism. What should we be skeptical about? Well, to begin with, not about things that everyone else is skeptical about. Skepticism has a way of creating its own social conformity.

Targeted skepticism should be addressed to things that really matter, not trivial things, and to things assumed to be obvious. Now I'm going to talk about things that are often assumed to be obvious where you and I live on a university or college campus. For example, it tends to be assumed that you are your brain.

And many people will, even if they don't believe that, they will say that because that has become a part of what they think to be scientific orthodoxy. If I may say so, it isn't scientific at all, though often it tries to gather scientific languages and suggestions around it to fortify its authority. But that would be something to be skeptical about.

Now right away when you say, "Well, what are we going to be thinking when we do that?" That always comes up when you suggest something to be skeptical about. What about this one? Marriage should be based on romantic and sexual feelings. Well, probably many of you have or will make a decision about marriage based on romantic and sexual feelings.

But is that actually a good basis for marriage? And then the question comes up, "Well,

what else?" And that actually is a very fruitful question to ask because it will lead you into the question, "Well, what is marriage for?" And it's very hard to get a good discussion of that because it's ordinarily a soon. "Well, we're turned on by one another." And of course there's the problem that when it's turned off, then it's really off. And people will take that as a reason for getting un-merry.

So these things have a lot of importance. Moreality is just feelings. So no one has a right to tell someone else what they ought to do.

That's very dear to the modern heart. But is that really true? Most of the past, it was assumed that you had an obligation to help people understand what was right and good. And of course it was often abused and treated in a bad way.

But still there was a community, pretty well up into the 20th century, of people who help others, young people, especially, understand what was right and what was wrong and what was good and what was bad and what was virtuous and what was vicious. But that idea of just being feelings kills that whole enterprise. And maybe that something is gained, but I do think that much is lost.

So just go on to the next slide, and what I'm saying here is I repeat the previous slide, but at the bottom I have added, "devote serious intellectual work to such issues." That's targeted skepticism. Targeted skepticism takes these issues that are so important and devotes serious intellectual work to them. Well finally, let's talk about ultimate issues.

And of course the universities at one time that were devoted to very toss were concerned about ultimate issues more than anything else. And that wasn't all that long ago. In fact, if you were to go back to the origins of Pomona College and look at talking and thinking of the people who founded it, you might be surprised the extent to which it is founded with concern for ultimate issues.

It's true of USC, it's true of Stanford. Berkeley began as a Presbyterian College. I finished up at Wisconsin, and Bascom Hall is named after a president of many years who was a minister of the gospel.

And it was very common for ministers to be presidents even of secular institutions. See that is something that has changed. So let's go on very familiar artifact next, John 3 16.

John 3 16 is one of the most common things known in our culture. It used to be a guy that would, he had something look like an afro but it was rainbow color and he'd all sit down in the end zone where when they kicked a field goal or something, he would be on the camera. And he would put up a sign, it said John 3 16.

It's all it said. And so now let's think a moment about this. Look at what John 3 16 says.

"God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son to it that whoever believes in

him should not perish but have everlasting wine." So now our problem is that something like that is so common and familiar as we say breeds contempt actually familiarity first breeds non familiarity and then contempt is easy. Because when we're familiar with something we tend to stop thinking about it. But now this is pretty big deal.

This is a pretty big deal. And for most of the history of the universities and colleges, the older colleges, not the New Orleans, you won't find this with Pitzer for example or UCLA, they're newer. And they are in a period where people build universities and colleges just for education.

Not because God so loved the world or the theological truth. So we need to think about that. Why was that so important? Perhaps reworded again.

I've reworded it on the next slide. God cared so much about humanity that he sent his unique son among us so that whoever relied on him would not lead a futile and failing existence but would have a quality of life that is like God's eternal. Now you can see why 3D religion as non-conquenit turns out to be important because it has assumptions that we can regard something like this as simply an expression of emotion and you certainly don't want to build an intellectual institution like a university just around the emotion.

And so over a period of time, theology and all that was built around it disappeared from the universities. So I want to leave you with just this fact to think about. The university system and its history was built around in the western world, was built around things like John 3 16.

People actually believed it and they thought that it was a part of knowledge for the most part. That's a fact. Now here's a question.

What happened? How did that change come about? How did it come about that this was set aside and instead of this kind of truth secularism takes its place? I'm not questioning that. I'm just saying how did it happen. Generally speaking, people don't know how it happened.

Was it that someone somewhere found out that John 3 16 was false or that it was not knowledge or something of that sort? Well a lot of people have thought that but if you were forced to trace it down and make it stick, it might be hard to do. And so this is where we need to be skeptical. We need to be skeptical about John 3 16.

We need to make it a topic of inquiry. But we also need to be skeptical about secularism. One of the hardest things to do is to be skeptical about the things that are in most need of skepticism.

And if anything could be done about that on the campuses, it would be a great renewal of intellectual life on the campuses. Now you have to look at the consequences of rejecting religious truth from the domain of truth, of identifying it with feelings. Where

does that leave you? What does secularism give you to live by? So your secular, congratulations.

What's next? And once we've got over the idea that we need to get away from religion, then we have to face the question of what we're going to live by. And that is where our skepticism needs to take hold. It needs to drive us to inquiry.

And we need to go back to things that often look very familiar. But in fact, really aren't. But we haven't thought about very much.

Both on both sides of the question of secularism or God so lived the world that he gave his only begotten son. Because these are so important for human life. Skepticism is vital in education.

And we need to have a revival of it targeted skepticism to help us pursue the knowledge that we need to live by and not just to pass courses. Thank you very much. [Applause]

[Music] Find more content like this on [veritas.org](http://veritas.org). And be sure to follow the Veritas form on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

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