



## James Ferguson Conant, Ph.D.

Chester D. Tripp Professor of Humanities

University of Chicago

Born in 1958 in Kyoto, Japan

Studied Philosophy at Harvard University

---

### PROJECT

## Varieties of Philosophical Skepticism

The project will provide a fairly comprehensive taxonomy of the various kinds of problems that philosophers have termed "skeptical", as well as of the various kinds of philosophical response those skepticisms have engendered. The aim of the taxonomic exercise is to furnish a perspicuous overview of some of the dialectical relations that obtain across this range of problems and to show that such an overview affords a number of forms of philosophical insight.

### Recommended Reading

Conant, James Ferguson. "The Dialectic of Perspectivism, I and II." *SATS*, Autumn, 2005 and Spring, 2006 issues.

Conant, James Ferguson. "Varieties of Skepticism." In *Wittgenstein and Skepticism*, edited by Denis McManus. London and New York: Routledge, 2004.

Conant, James Ferguson. "The Search for Logically Alien Thought: Descartes, Kant, Frege and the Tractatus." In *The Philosophy of Hilary Putnam*, edited by Christopher S. Hill, 115-180. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1993. (*Philosophical Topics* 20, 1992)

## (Two) Varieties of Philosophical Skepticism

The main project I am currently working on divides into three parts. In the first, I provide a taxonomy; in the second, I explore and clarify various questions that immediately arise regarding the supposed "kinds" that I am thus apparently able to distinguish; and, in the third, I try to answer these questions and to show why doing so sheds unexpected philosophical light on a number of other matters.

The taxonomy initially purports to distinguish various kinds of philosophical skepticism and the various kinds of philosophical response these skepticisms have engendered. I distinguish primarily between four varieties of philosophical skepticism - Pyrrhonian, Agrippan, Cartesian, and Kantian. The eventual aim of the taxonomic exercise is to furnish a perspicuous overview of some of the dialectical relations that obtain across the range of problems that philosophers have called (and continue to call) "skeptical".

Once the taxonomy is apparently in place, I then press various sorts of questions about the supposedly distinct sorts of skepticism that it distinguishes. Some of these questions are historical (such as, "How are these varieties of skepticism historically related to one another" and "When did each variety first come up the scene?"), some are systematic (such as, "How are these varieties related to one another?", "Do they form distinct species?", and thus "What is a taxonomy of such varieties really a taxonomy of?"), and some are both (such as, "Why are different varieties of skepticism so easily confused with one another?" and "What have we learned when we learn the answer to this question?").

I then go on to argue that such an overview, if properly executed, affords four forms of philosophical insight: (1) it allows one to command a clearer view of the sorts of relations that obtain across supposedly distinct areas of philosophy, (2) it allows one to distinguish the very different sorts of things philosophers mean when they employ (what is apparently) the same philosophical terminology (and especially, though not only, when they employ the word 'skepticism'), (3) it allows one to see more clearly what is distinctive about the respective contributions to thought about skepticism of certain major figures in the philosophical tradition (most notably, Kant and Wittgenstein), and (4) it allows one to see more clearly why such major figures are often misread and why their best commentators often misread one another and misunderstand themselves-taking themselves to disagree with one another when they do not, taking themselves to agree with one another when they do not, and taking themselves to be in agreement with themselves when they are not.

In preparing for Tuesday, I concluded that it is not feasible to present an overview of the whole project in the space of a one-hour talk. So what I will do instead is to present a fragment of the taxonomy in question, involving two of the varieties in question - Cartesian and Kantian - and then briefly to explore with you some of the aforementioned aspects of the project, as they arise in connection with just these two varieties.

---

PUBLICATIONS FROM THE FELLOW LIBRARY

Conant, James Ferguson (Konstanz,2014)

Friedrich Nietzsche : Perfektionismus & Perspektivismus

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1603778543>

Conant, James Ferguson (Fayetteville, AR,2014)

The second person

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=896293866>

Philosophical Topics ; 42

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=896293866>

Conant, James Ferguson (2009)

Absorption - Die Ontologie einer Spielfilmwelt

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=682945935>

Conant, James Ferguson (2009)

Absorption : Die Ontologie einer Spielfilmwelt

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=670716278>

Conant, James Ferguson (2007)

Mild Mono-Wittgensteinianism

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=883067757>

Conant, James Ferguson (2006)

The dialectic of perspectivism, II

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=768039983>

Conant, James Ferguson (2005)

The dialectic of perspectivism, I

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=768039649>

Conant, James Ferguson (2004)

Varieties of scepticism

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=883087162>

Conant, James Ferguson (2002)

Können unsere kognitiven Vermögen die Gegenstände selbst erreichen? : Putnam über die Quellen des Skeptizismus

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=883723875>

Conant, James Ferguson (2002)

The method of the Tractatus

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=883086859>