

# BIG QUESTIONS

## THE SKEPTICISM ASSESSMENT

### OVERVIEW:

Whenever we are presented a claim — whether it's "The sky is blue" or " $E = mc^2$ " — we have at least three options. We can **believe** the claim and recognize it as true; we can **suspend judgment** about the claim and refuse to actively believe it; or we can **disbelieve** it, recognizing it as false. Consider the following scenarios and record your reactions to the cases. Then, on the next page, you'll be prompted to reflect on your results.

Your Skepticism Assessment				
A close family member calls you from jail. They've been arrested for a minor crime, but deny that they committed it. They do have a bit of a past, however, and it's plausible that they are guilty. When you go to pick them up, they look you in the eye and say "I am not guilty. You have to believe me."	"I believe you." (2)	"I don't know what to think." (0)	"I don't believe you." (1)	Score:
	Why?			
You're flipping through the channels one night when you come across the cable news show you most trust. The anchor of the show reports that anonymous sources have revealed deep corruption in the political party you most disagree with.	"There's corruption." (2)	"Maybe there is, maybe not." (0)	"Probably no corruption." (-1)	Score:
	Why?			
You and a friend are having lunch one day when she puts down her fork and confronts you. It's difficult to say this, she tells you, but she's noticed how you treat your friends and family when stressed. She says that you have a real problem controlling your anger and need to seek help.	"She's probably right." (-2)	"I don't know." (0)	"She's wrong about me." (2)	Score:
	Why?			
You and your partner are trying to remember whether you turned the stove off before leaving the house. You clearly seem to remember turning it off, but your partner isn't sure and asks, "Are you sure you turned it off?"	"I definitely turned it off." (2)	"I don't know whether I did or not." (0)	"I probably forgot to turn it off." (-1)	Score:
	Why?			
You attend a lecture at your local library where a biologist is warning about the dangers of fumes being emitted from a factory that you're a major investor in.	"The biologist is wrong." (2)	"We need to investigate further." (0)	"The biologist is probably right." (1)	Score:
	Why?			

Total Score:

## RESULTS:

Score	-4 to 2	3 to 6	7 to 10
Description	<p><b><u>Mega-skeptic:</u></b> You don't easily believe what you're told, but not because you trust yourself more than others. You're willing to doubt even your own senses and memory if confronted with the slightest evidence that they are unreliable. Your standards for evidence are very high.</p>	<p><b><u>Moderate-skeptic:</u></b> You aren't afraid to believe if you think the evidence is strong, but you don't jump to conclusions either. You're judicious in evaluating sources of belief and use caution and discretion in believing.</p>	<p><b><u>Strong Believer:</u></b> You tend to have strong reactions to things people tell you and to "go with your gut." You don't see much sense in over-deliberating, and would rather just make a decision and go with it, even if it means occasionally getting things wrong.</p>
Pros and Cons	<p><b>Pros:</b> You aren't easily deceived and have a deep respect for the truth.</p> <p><b>Cons:</b> You might often find yourself unable to make decisions and sometimes lack clarity of belief.</p>	<p><b>Pros:</b> You subject your beliefs to constraints and don't often get things wrong.</p> <p><b>Cons:</b> You occasionally make big mistakes in forming beliefs and sometimes miss opportunities out of caution.</p>	<p><b>Pros:</b> You know what you believe on almost everything and can decide quickly.</p> <p><b>Cons:</b> You make a fair number of errors and have to spend time and energy correcting these.</p>

### Reflection Questions:

1. With your results in hand, look back over the situations and see if you can ascertain how someone with a more or less skeptical score would have formed beliefs in those cases. Would a strategy different from your own be more rational?
2. The core of any intellectually virtuous life is a deep respect for the truth. Such respect does not correlate neatly with skepticism, although traditionally, skepticism has been seen as one way of expressing intellectual humility and respect for the truth. How do you think someone with your skepticism score can show respect for the truth? How well do you think you do this?
3. Do you think you've grown more or less skeptical with age? Why?