

## Scope of Skepticism on "Skeptically Yours" Podcast

Written by D.J. Grothe

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This last Sunday, I appeared on [Skeptically Yours](#), a relatively new show hosted by Emery Emery and Heather Henderson. My fellow guests were podcaster

[Ross Blocher](#)

and comedian and YouTuber

[John Rael](#)

.

The freewheeling discussion was fun, and explored the proper scope of skepticism, and recent [debates online](#)

on the topic between JREF Senior Fellow Steven Novella and atheist blogger PZ Myers. We discussed

[why JREF is not an atheist organization](#)

, even though many of us who work and volunteer here just happen to be atheists. We talked about whether skepticism “majors in the minors,” as opposed to focusing on more important issues than just “Bigfoot skepticism.” We explored the best ways to engage those who hold unwarranted beliefs. We distinguished between the method of skepticism and the conclusions of atheism, and

[how atheism is not necessarily continuous with skepticism](#)

. We talked a lot about celebrating religious, political and ideological diversity, as well as other important kinds of diversity, within skepticism. And we explored whether or not scientific skepticism is overtly hostile to atheism or social justice issues.

I believe scientific skepticism is important work, and that the work of skeptics — people I’ve called the workhorses of skepticism who actually do scientific paranormal investigations of claims, like Ben Radford and Joe Nickell, Blake Smith and Karen Stollznow, Daniel Loxton and Bob Blaskiewicz, Sharon Hill, Hayley Stevens, Banachek, Jamy Ian Swiss and so many others — not to mention the giants educating the public about pseudoscience and the paranormal for decades like Michael Shermer and especially James Randi — that the work of these folks is not at all trivial, and indeed is very important service in the public interest.

People are harmed when they believe paranormal and pseudoscientific nonsense, and the work of skepticism, as sort of intellectual consumer protection informed by science and critical thinking and [motivated by a kind of humanism or regard for others’ well-being](#), aims to help people from being hurt by their undue belief. (If you are going to be skeptical when buying

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someone's used car, and you kick the tires, look under the hood, how much better to be skeptical when buying someone else's ideas!)

During the *Skeptically Yours* interview, Ross Blocher talked about the best approach to engaging believers. His edited version of what he said is:

To demand specific conclusions from someone is to ignore human nature. All of us fall on a continuum of belief; many of us started somewhere else on that spectrum and have moved over time. It's a temporal process, a personal process, and should be a continual process. You can help people with that journey, or lead them with argument and evidence, but you can't do it for them. The moment you say, 'Hey, you need to come cross this line and be over on this side,' you're provoking a defensive response. It's ungracious. Trust the process.

I generally favor this approach, recognizing that sometimes other approaches can work, too. What we know about belief formation suggests that hostile challenges are rarely effective, [depending on how someone adopted a particular belief](#)

— whether it was through personal experience, assent to authority, or rational arguments.

(When Randi for decades

[goes on the attack against the charlatans](#)

, he never attacks the beguiled, but only the peddlers of the harmful junk belief.)

Yes, there are [important differences](#) between skepticism, atheism and humanism. And if you consider yourself part of the “skeptics movement,” and want to join forces with those skeptics like Randi and others who have worked for years and even decades to advance common cause, I think you should know something about its history and why it exists. To that end, download this new project from Skeptic Society's [Daniel](#)

[Loxton](#)

, settle in for a few hours, and dig into the long conversation about why skeptics do what they do, and why they often limit their focus.

Download “Why Is There a Skeptical Movement?” by Daniel Loxton [here](#) .

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