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## **A Skeptic's Guide to Belief**

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Not only is Ken Crispin a most distinguished jurist, Queen's Counsel, advocate, judge, doctor of philosophy, author and polymath, he is also a truly renaissance man, and this is a remarkable book. Let me tell you why.

When I first went up to Oxford in my late teens, the Provost, the Head of our College, Lord Franks, a distinguished philosopher, public servant, diplomat, and former Chairman of Lloyds Bank, spoke very perceptively to us newly arrived undergraduates on our first day, as I remember, along the following lines: "If you want to leave this place successfully, what should you do?" "Well", he said, as I remember, "there are two things that you should try to do. First, according to the university statutes, you need to satisfy the examiners in order to obtain a degree. That should not be too difficult for most of you, because you have the ability quite easily to be able to fool the examiners. You will have obtained enough intelligence, and certainly enough guile (he said), to be able to fool them by the time you face your final examinations. The danger with being able to do that, of course (he went on), is that, having gained enough guile to fool the examiners, you may continue throughout your life to being able to fool everyone, and even yourselves, by guile or otherwise. (I might add that a later student of the course on which I embarked was Boris Johnson). So (Lord Franks said), the second important thing that you need to do in this place is to begin to understand life - and begin to understand life in such a way that you seriously seek the truth about it as far as you are able, not by fooling or even necessarily impressing anyone, including yourself, but by relentlessly searching the truth of existence as far as you are able". That second task is what Ken Crispin has done for us all here in this book.

In this book he has dealt with the central issues of existence, not simply human existence but existence as a whole.

Fundamentally, this book is for three types of people. It is for those who have belief but wish to think and delve further, and it is for those who do not have belief but also wish to think and delve further. And, of course, it is for all of those people - a very great number - in between. Dr Crispin says at the beginning of the book, and I entirely agree with him, that, if you do not wish to be disturbed, but are seeking a guru to confirm your beliefs, then do not read this book. However, if you can say, as in Mark 9: 24: "Lord, I believe. Help thou my unbelief!", or if you have a genuinely open mind or a mind concerned with Christian apologetics, or indeed the apologetics of any religion, then this is a book for you.

Near the beginning Justice Crispin defines "skepticism" as not "doubt, disbelief, or negativity", but rather "the process of applying reason and critical thinking to determine validity" (page 10). As perhaps the most famous old boy of my school, William Thompson, who later became Lord Kelvin, spoke about the school's motto, "quaerere verum" ("to seek the truth"), it is about striving to seek the truth, as we each can understand it, as best as we can within the limitations of our humanity.

As I said, the book deals with the central issues of life, as appropriated and otherwise understood by humanity. It thus explores the issues of belief, atheism and agnosticism. A great virtue of it is that it applies rationality and critical theory equally to belief, including Christian belief, and atheism. This monograph has a most useful discourse on skepticism itself, and looks most carefully at the presuppositions and emotions of those who argue on both sides. The book thus takes on both religious fundamentalism and the fundamentalisms of atheism. It takes up the important principle from Brian Garvey that: "absence of evidence is not evidence of absence" (page 50). It is also contemporary, in that it deals with the recent discourse initiated by Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, on these issues. It then goes on to examine and evaluate the classic arguments for the existence of God, but does so in a

contemporary vein, as it looks at current manifestations of those arguments. It then evaluates the discourse around human consciousness and free will, goes on to examine human experience, and then most interestingly looks at contemporary medical understandings of life, death and the question of the afterlife. So the book deals with the central issues of life, the questions which scholars have at times told us we think about around 4am in the morning, when everybody else in the house is asleep and we cannot sleep (sometimes, of course, after we have worked out in our heads how to put in our tax return to our greatest advantage!). As Dr Crispin puts it, “So, are life, consciousness and free will merely unintended and inexplicable consequences of forces unleashed by the Big Bang, or are they gifts of a sentient creator?” (page 136). And again, as he states it at the end of the book, “the case for theism has been strengthened rather than diminished by modern cosmology” (page 191). The breadth of the book’s reach in contemporary interdisciplinary studies is truly remarkable. For this reason alone, if not for many others, it is a unique volume.

But be careful as you read the book. Its touch is light, and its language and presentation are most engaging and felicitous, and at times very funny indeed. It is also in places poignantly personal. Witty it certainly is. For example, in dealing with natural selection in the evolutionary process, the author asks: “Would the predators have otherwise morphed to vegetarians and shared their salads with the deer and the rabbits?” (page 45). Again, he discusses telepathic, or long-distant, spoon bending most wittily. Further, he writes, on human birth: “Even before we land, slippery and squirming, into the hands of a midwife waiting to submit us to various indignities and dump us on to the breasts of our relieved if breathless mothers, our lives are pervaded by experience” (page 137). And again, as he puts it: “if you meet fervent souls who claim to be able to explain it all” (everything in existence), “I can only suggest you try to remain patient and change the subject; they may be able to say something useful about basket weaving or petunias”. (page 190). Certainly, I can assure you, at no point does the book induce what the author refers to as “terminal boredom” (page 86). Its words and style are a delight to read and savour just for their own sake. So be careful! Do not let its most attractive presentation let you think that it is not serious. It is very serious, and parts of it need to be read slowly and very carefully indeed. As I said, the sheer breadth of the book’s reach in contemporary interdisciplinary studies is truly remarkable. For this reason alone, and for many others, it is a unique volume, and your life will be greatly enriched if you read it.

It is thus with great thanks and appreciation to Dr Crispin for his deep insights and broad scholarship that I have the greatest pleasure in launching this excellent book, *A Skeptic’s Guide to Belief*.