



Shadow of a Doubt

THE MONTHLY CALENDAR OF THE NATIONAL CAPITAL AREA SKEPTICS

June, 1998

SPRING COOKOUT

Hosted by Grace and Chip Denman

As we end another successful season of NCAS meetings, as our final get together for the 1997-98 season, Chip and Grace Denman invites NCAS to hold an afternoon cookout at their home in Silver Spring. Meet fellow skeptics for an enjoyable afternoon talking about skeptical, credulous, or other relevant or irrelevant topics.

Bring some eats to share with the group. A Grill (and the heat) will be provided for cooking. Bring hot dogs, hamburgers, beverages, snacks, salads or desserts.

Everyone should RSVP by June 17 in order to get a count of who's coming.

Saturday, June 20, 1998, 2:00pm -- ???

Near downtown Silver Spring, Maryland

RSVP by calling the Skeptics Line at 301-587-3827 to let the Denmans know you are coming and to get directions.

Everyone Welcome -- Members and Non-members -- No admission charge

Call the NCAS Skeptic Line at 301-587-3827 for further info.

HAVE A HAPPY AND SAFE SUMMER

June 20th is our last meeting of this spring. NCAS takes the summer off in not holding formal meetings, but continue to send email to us if you come across any interesting events (ncas@ncas.org). We will return on September 19 for our next meeting. (See 1998-99 schedule below.)

1998--1999 SCHEDULE

Our meeting schedule has been organized for the next year. All meetings will take place at the Bethesda Branch of the Montgomery County Library, 7400 Arlington Road, a short walk from the Bethesda Metro station.

- September 19
- October 17
- November 14
- December 19
- January 16, 1999
- February 20
- March 13
- April 17
- May 15
- June 19

WHAT IS SKEPTICISM?

As you relax this summer, think about ways you can help NCAS in the following year. What is skepticism and what is its role in the world today? Is it needed? The following comes from CSICOP and may help you in your thoughts:

Skepticism is an ancient philosophical and scientific outlook that traces its origins to Greece and Rome. Sextus Empiricus, Pyrrho, Carneades, and others advanced the skeptical outlook in the ancient Graeco-Roman world. Skepticism went into eclipse in Christian Europe for over a thousand years, but it was revived during the modern period when thinkers as diverse as Bayle, Descartes, Montaigne, and Hume advocated it. Indeed, in no small measure the revival of modern skepticism led to the development of the scientific revolution in the sixteenth century. Scientific discovery rapidly advanced when men and women were liberated from the blind hold of authority, faith, custom, revelation, and mysticism, and when they sought to appeal to inductive evidence and experiment to test hypotheses and deductive reason and mathematics to develop more comprehensive theories.

There are at least three kinds of skepticism that may be distinguished; the first in its extreme form is negative and nihilistic. It has had both classical and modern defenders. It holds that no knowledge is possible, and this applies not only to scientific and philosophical theories, but to any kind of moral or political principles. This form of skepticism is totally unreliable. A person cannot hope to function in the world if he or she is in a state of utter doubt and indecision. A second form of skepticism, which developed in ancient times and came to fruition in the modern world was called by David Hume, "mitigated skepticism." This approach said that we needed to act in the world and to formulate beliefs about it.

Yet it still presupposed an underlying gnawing skepticism about the reliability of knowledge. Still a third kind of skepticism had emerged on the philosophical scene in the early part of the 20th century. Charles Peirce and the American pragmatists argued that skeptical doubt is but one phase within a process of inquiry, but it can be overcome when hypotheses are tested by adequate evidence and justifying reasons. This form of skepticism is positive and constructive and it is limited to specific contexts under inquiry. Scientific inquirers realize that their formulations may not be fixed or final and may be modified in the future by future observations and theories. Nonetheless, science presupposes the conviction that reliable knowledge is possible and can be attained by persistent efforts. [It is this third form of skepticism that guides the modern skeptical movement today.]

Last Change: September 8, 1998