

Neut Yinkaw (May wisdom have its spell cast on it): The Ethiopian version of Skepticism

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61593/DBU.BIRJSH.01.09.20>

Abstract

This research is intended to introduce to the global readership the salencies that outline and define the Ethiopian version of skepticism. This pioneering onus comes with the task of critically reviewing the place skepticism holds and the notch it represents in the history of philosophy. Thus the objective of this research is one of bringing to the day light the Ethiopian variety of skepticism within the overall context of philosophical repertoire. To pull this goal off, this research is designed right from get go to make use of the rational and critical methods of philosophical probing supported by key informant interview and focus group discussion. Following a rigorous application of logical methods of philosophical undertakings on the issue under scouring, this research comes out with the conclusion that holds: The Ethiopian version of skepticism, touted *neut-yinkaw* (may wisdom cast its spell on it) is a healthy and natural move to suspend judgment so that and until we will be spared from scuttling our way right into hasty generalization. *Neut-yinkaw* is a social skepticism that stands firm its ground in being an out and out anathema to prejudice, bias, partiality, gullibility, half-baked judgments and injustice.

Keywords: *Neut Yinkaw*, social skepticism, *shmagllae*, half-baked-judgments, absolute skepticism

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Article information: Received 05 August 2025; Revised on 27 October 2025; Accepted on 18 November 2025

Introduction

Perusing the related philosophical literature brings out for us that skepticism runs the gamut from an innocuous everyday practice to an absolute versions of it. Put otherwise, we can easily observe, in our mundane life, people suspending judgments for a number of reasons. Some do so in a natural and healthy drive not to jump to conclusions, and others do it just to spare themselves the burden and price of running into hasty generalizations. People naturally tend to hold themselves back and take time, mull and munch over the issue staring them stark in the eye, collect as much data as possible and admissible, see the right and left, hearken the pros and cons, check the nadirs and the azures there might be to them, see if there is more to them than meets the eye, before passing judgments on them. So far so good. There are also those skeptical moments, tendencies, positions, reasons that are largely frequented by philosophers who think that knowledge of the metaphysical principles is not possible. A very good case in point is David Hume who argues that all that we know is what is given us in the phenomenon (Hume 1902, Descartes 1911, Randal and Buchler 1949, Berkeley 1949, Ryle 1949). Like any one could see the plot thickens here as far as the skeptic tenet of

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suspending judgment is concerned. Hume in his anti-metaphysical skepticism holds that all that we know stems from two sources, to wit, matters of fact and relations of ideas. Goodbye and good riddance to metaphysical principles and relations, so it stands, with David Hume. Let's have a closer look at his argument:

All the objects of human reason or enquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds, to wit, relations of ideas and matters of fact. Of the first kind are the sciences of Geometry, Algebra and Arithmetic; and in short every affirmation which is either intuitively or demonstratively certain. That the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the square of the two sides is a proposition which expresses a relation between these figures. Propositions of this kind are discoverable by a mere operation of thought, without dependence on what is anywhere existent in the universe...Matters of fact are the second objects of human reason, are ascertained in the same manner, nor is our evidence of their truth, however great, of a like nature with the foregoing.. The contrary of every matter of fact is still possible, because it

can never imply a contradiction...That the sun will not rise tomorrow is no less intelligible a proposition and implies no more contradiction than the affirmation that it will rise (Hume 1902: 25 -26)

Literature review

The intensity with which the legacy of suspending judgments scurries to the next level has come true in the hands of absolute skeptics. This class of skeptics handles skepticism with seriousness like none other that it makes Hume's radical position look like a mild one. The bevy of thinkers in this class is best represented by their stance which doubts the possibility of any knowledge whatsoever. They feel certain that nothing can be known for sure. And this is exactly where the name Pyrrho steps into the scene. Pyrrho founded in 300 BC a school of philosophers who called themselves skeptics (Miller 1984).

Following their iron-clad stance that nothing can be known for certain, the absolute skeptics call for a philosophical edict which demands that we suspend judgment on everything and anything in the world. Pyrrho and his disciples dig deeper, way too deeper the pitch of skepticism such that they finally end up in stumbling into it themselves. Put otherwise, the absolute skeptics turn out to be the victims of their own extreme philosophical positions where knowledge of reality, and for that matter, knowledge of anything else is concerned. It is a situation philosophers dub a self defeating position. In plain terms the Pyrrhonics in their extreme position end up in hanging with their own petard (Mindaralew 2016). The self-contradictory nature of the absolute skeptics' position is clearly pointed out by Joseph Leighton who touted Pyrrho and his followers' position as dogmatic skepticism:

This type of skepticism was first formulated by Pyrrho (365 – 275 BC) and was further developed by Carneades, 215 – 130 BC. Dogmatic skepticism is self-contradictory, for to say that it is impossible to know is to make a dogmatic statement which claims to be truth... Its stand point is that we are not certain whether we know something, or whether we can know nothing. Since we don't know whether we do know something or

nothing, the only consistent attitude is that in which there is a suspension of all judgments. To be thoroughly consistent, the Pyrrhonic skeptic would have to hold that he was not certain whether we ought to suspend judgment. The skeptic to be consistent, in all respects, should add that he can't know whether one ought to say that one ought to suspend judgment, and that one cannot know whether one cannot know whether one ought say that one ought to suspend judgment, and so on ad infinitum (Leighton 1923: 52).

In what appears to be quite in chime with Leighton's argument St. Augustine hurled his venomous attacks against the absolute skeptics in general and against Carneades in particular. St. Augustine must have found it something beyond he could bear to learn that the Skeptics are casting the spell of uncertainty that borders on ignorance on logic, math and the common place perceptions and the world we live in at large. St Augustine addresses Carneades, the faithful follower and adulator of Pyrrho, as follows: "You say that nothing can be apprehended in philosophy...I hold as certain either that there is or is not one world. And if there is not one there is either a finite or an infinite number of worlds. Carneades would teach that the opinion resembles false" (Augustine 1957: 23)

The classic skeptics as represented by Pyrrho and his followers held unto a position which is vulnerable to the fiercest attacks of subsequent philosophers on at least one count, to wit, the question of being consistently thorough. Being consistent is an issue the dogmatic skeptics would find to be their grave yard. It appears that absolute skepticism or dogmatic skepticism is a brand standing for a philosophical position which is rather too indefensible to fight for. Said otherwise, it is a rather untenable position attracting so many venomous attacks and offering non in response. Why? Because, for everything offered in response would soon turn out to be calling for another shell of a new round of attack mounted against it. If they begin by stating that nothing can be known for sure, then a question would immediately suggest itself at this hiatus: Do you mean, even this

statement of yours can't be known for sure? If the absolute skeptics are consistent then their answer must be one which holds that even this statement or position of ours cannot be known for sure. There you go absolute skeptics! However if the skeptics prefer to say no, then they would suffer the problem of inconsistency. Why? Because it means, a proposition which holds that "Nothing can be known for certain" is an exception to what it stands for, what it claims to hold. If that is the case then the very proposition and the philosophical position that rests on it will turn out to be self-defeating. If however they, the skeptics, accept that it is a self-excusing position, a position that works for everything else except itself, then it fails to be a consistent position. So there is no way to escape the double edged blows of inconsistency and self-contradiction. It is for this reason one might be justified to hold that absolute skepticism is an untenable position (Katen 1973). In a succinct way Miller puts the self-invoked and self-fed indefensible move of the absolute skeptics as follows:

Pyrrho himself anticipated the similar criticism that his position implied in own falsehood. He retorted (as some skeptical-type readers will be tempted to retort) that he was not in fact, even certain that he was not certain of anything. But, of course, that kind of talk could go on forever:

We cannot know anything.

We cannot know that we cannot know anything.

We cannot know that we cannot know that we cannot know anything (Miller 1984: 179).

Thus the question worth pausing over at this juncture is therefore one of scouring for another variety of skepticism which is somehow immune to the snares of inconsistency from which the Pyrrhonic school suffers. The search for a new brand of skepticism turned out to be one that lands us a place in the world of social judgments within the repertoire of Ethiopian traditions. This version of Ethiopian skepticism is touted *neutyinkaw* which, roughly translated, would mean may wisdom cast its spell on it.

Methodology

For the success of this study the researcher drew heavily up on two sources: primary and secondary. The secondary sources that come so handy for this research are classic and contemporary books in philosophy in general and deontological ethics in particular, journals and related works from other disciplines, to cite just a few. As to the primary source, the researcher conducted a fieldwork where data relevant to the task at hand were gathered. Accordingly, I conducted focus group discussions twice. To this end I selected eleven focus group discussants in strict compliance to my research objectives, making sure they possess relevant knowledge and experience, share a level of homogeneity so that open discussion will, as it was, be facilitated. Since this research is a bold philosophical undertaking bent on wedding the purely conceptual enterprise namely philosophy with the empirical social reality, the researcher made use of the rational and critical methods that are home to all philosophical endeavors coupled with qualitative data gathering methods as touched upon above. Interspersing the rational and critical methods of philosophical analysis and synthesis with the empirical methods of thematic approach analysis the data thus gathered were organized, categorized analyzed and systematized into a research reporting format.

Neut Yinkaw (May wisdom cast its spell on it):

The Ethiopian version of Skepticism

In matters that are of great importance to the community at large and to each and every individual as such the response of the *Shmagllaes* (the elders, the sages) as well as that of the community has *neut-yinkaw* written all over it. Put otherwise. Be it a fight individuals pick somehow along their daily life routines, or a conflict that involves groups or neighborhoods, whether it is a skirmish in market places on market days, or a conflict akin to abduction and an altercation leading to misunderstanding which converts eventually into a run-in amid a family, a group, in marriage, in social organizations and traditional associations et cetera, it is customary for the community or for the parties to the conflict to take their cases first to the sages (Mindaralew 2012, Mindaralew 2014). And every time such cases are

brought to the attention of the *shmagllaes*, the first and immediate response of the sages or the *shmagllaes* is an automatic ruling which holds: *neut-yinkaw*. The reaction of the focus group discussants on matters pertaining to this issue is worth quoting at this hiatus:

It could be a matter so bloody that might seem at first glance that the parties to the conflict may not see eye to eye ever again. It might be a case that can take the entire community in a full-fledged battle against another community over matters of communal grazing lands, water holes, spiritual sites, burial sites, worship centers, what not. It could be a case where a certain person with his friends in his company abducting a girl in a neighborhood or from a far off land. It might as well be a social uproar, a public indignation, a social wrath following an injustice perpetrated by an individual or a group against another individual or another group. No matter what the case might be, it is customary to take it first off to the sages or the *shmagllaes*. Upon receipt of the case, no sooner did the sages hear the case than they reached a decision which has it to say: *neut-yinkaw*.

As could be learned from the above discussion, it is clear that upon receipt of a given social or individual case the *shmagllaes* or the sages in no time flat go for a decision which rules: *neut-yinkaw*. Clearly, *neut yinkaw* is a decision to postpone a judgment. The sages to whom the case is referred prefer to back off from passing a judgment. It can as well be said that it is a move that has taken a very long and deep roots within Amhara tradition in particular and Ethiopian traditions in general to suspend judgments, to withhold any move that has the propinquity to pass a half-baked judgment on sight. At this juncture questions of thematic import suggest themselves: Why do Ethiopians prefer to back off from passing an immediate judgment upon a case presented to the appropriate body? Why would they prefer suspending a judgment or judgments upon a given case to passing one as soon as the case pops up before them? Why is it that Ethiopians in their long

traditions of conflict handling track records go almost unanimously for suspending judgments rather than leaping up to a hastened judgment?

The answer to the above questions and to other related ramifications of them lies in a nut shell in the Ethiopian version of skepticism, otherwise named *neut-yinkaw*. To begin with, *neut-yinkaw* is an antidote to hasty generalization. It is a judgment not to suspend judgment for ever ad infinitum; on the contrary it is a judgment that serves as immunity to passing a poorly informed, wisdom-bereft, and probably more mistaken than otherwise judgment. Thus this philosophy spares the community from a harm that will be visited upon the claimants or the parties to the case, upon the community at large, directly or indirectly. *Neut-yinkaw* spares the community from suffering the disastrous consequences of hasty generalization. It keeps the overall community held back from a hasty generalization whose hallmarks are succinctly put by Patrick Hurley as follows: "Hasty generalization is a fallacy that occurs when there is a reasonable likelihood that the sample is not representative of the group. Such a likelihood may arise if the sample is either too small or not randomly selected" (Hurley 1994: 138).

Seen from Hurley's vantage point, *neut-yinkaw* is indeed an anathema to gullibility, an out and out foe to falling naïve to a folly claimants might feel like playing you off and a bad soil to every judgment that jumps to conclusion while barely supported by evidence. *Neut Yinkaw* is therefore a social skepticism of Amhara origin which serves to spare the community from the injustices that could possibly be visited upon people who submitted their cases for the sages or any other body deemed appropriate by the society. In perfect chime with this tone and tenet of my argument the focus group discussants stated clearly what they think are the upsides of *neut-yinkaw* and the reasons the community upholds it since time out of mind, in a manner of speaking.

The sages, the elderly or anyone individual or group deemed appropriate by the society to sit upon a given civil or criminal case and to pass a judgment on it without fear of punishment or favor of reward, need time to probe into the heart

of the case at their disposal. Time is the best medicine to take back the flaring emotions and smoothen the raspy feelings. Perhaps in time, the parties to the conflict might find their cause barely enough to take them to the sages for arbitration. There are a number of cases that individuals or groups brought to the sages only to retake them back a few days later regretting their earlier behavior and the bad decisions that played them right into the hands of a conflict. In fact there are few cases that stiffen and get harder and bitter in the days that follow than the first day on which they came off. Either way, the sages or the elderly need to suspend judgment on a given case upon its arrival.

Suspending judgment upon a give case or a swathe of cases is one of the defining characteristics of philosophical skepticism. The idea that underpins this act of backing off from reaching a conclusion on the basis of a meager data in the heat of the moment is more prone to misleading one into making a hasty generalization and in most cases into making a blunder of judgment. In a bid to make a sagacious move and get at hand all that is required for one to be judicious, time appears to be, among other requirements, a sine qua non factor. The focus group discussants couldn't be more emphatic as they underlined the indispensability of this factor, viz., time.

Time is of essence such that the emotions subside, and the parties to the conflict come back to their senses. Meantime more information surfaces, better evidence emerges, secrets kept in confidence leak, plots being brewed for a long time, if there are any, ooze out. All of this benefits the latter judgment of the sages to be more and better informed, hence increasing substantially the chance of the judgment to be impartial and that of justice to be correctly served.

Neut-yinkaw as a social and healthy skepticism, in contrast to the classic skepticism of Pyrrho and Carneades deeply resonates with the people so much so that it gets its popular vents in the adages and aphorisms and sayings of the people.

Comparative Discussion

The following is a list of some of the adages the people make use of in manners that cement the arguments put forward heretofore in favor of the upsides of *neut-yinkaw*. The adages were collected from the sapient and key informants.

ሲሮቡ የታጠቁት (sirottu yattequt)

ሲሮቡ ይፈታል (sirottu yiffettal)

This saying would mean, in Amharic, armed running, disarmed running. Put differently, it as well means equipped in running, unequipped in harness. It advises, in the timeless wisdom it has been held high in the pedestals of the people who are its gatekeepers –the Amharas- that haste involved in forwarding one's argument would result at best in losing one's argument. Because an argument augmented in haste is an argument lost beforehand (Mindaralew 2013). Haste doesn't mean speed. It rather means, ill prepared for what the rules of engagement expect us to meet. So whatever is taken in haste, will be lost in haste, long before the journey is completed, the conflict resolved and the argument concluded,

የቸኮለች አፍስሳ ለቀመች (Yetchekolech afsesa leqmech)

This saying translates, in Amharic as to mean she who is in haste looses it first only to retrieve it later on. It is an adage that goes very much in compliance with the philosophy of *neut yinkaw*. As an Ethiopian variety of skepticism, *neut yinkaw* emphasizes the need to suspend all judgments pertaining to the matter at hand until sufficient evidence from both sides and, for that matter, from all sides has sufficient time to emerge. And this adage pinpoints that haste in matters of judgment is equivalent to losing what you have at first and doing all you could to recollect it later on, at best. So *neut yinkaw* is a social skepticism which behooves us not to begin our undertakings from a failure. It is a philosophy which makes it imperative for us not to kick off our duties by just getting being kicked down. Hence *neut yinkaw* as an Ethiopian brand of skepticism denies any room for unfounded, misinformed or ill-informed judgments to swing in. It is a social philosophy which states that the worst way to lose an argument is to lose it before you get started

(Mindaralew2013). And that is what logicians invariably term as hasty generalization.

የጅብ ችኩል (yejib chikkul)

ቀንድ ይነክሳል (qeund yineksal)

The above saying literally would mean a hyena in haste goes for the horn first. This is an Amhara saying meant to instill into the wider populace the time-proven wisdom which upholds stalwartly the quintessence there is in *neut yinkaw*, to wit, in haste all you can accomplish, at best, is a failure to know where your best is, where your vested interested lies, where you are better off, what not. The Ethiopian skepticism, *neut yinkaw*, is a system of socially rooted and publicly upheld principles that admonish one from setting out in haste, ill-prepared for a goal in mind, a purpose at hand, a journey ahead, an issue to resolve, et cetera, unless one intends to run the risk of ending up only in grabbing helplessly the wrong end of the journey, barking in despair up the wrong tree, flogging the dead horse, you name it.

የረጋ ወተት ቅቤ ይወጣዋል። (Yeregga weuteut qbae yeweutawal)

This adage literally means, in Amharic, milk that takes time to curdle will produce butter. Socially it means time taken to ponder over the best one has, to appraise the best at one's disposal will end up in yielding the desired, more valued, more hyped and more acceptable result than one can admit. That exactly is in a very good chime with the heart of the philosophy of *neut yinkaw*: Do you want justice be served for real? Do you want just be served impartially? Do you want an objective ruling over the case one sits in judgment? Then let wisdom have its spell cast on it. In order that wisdom can have its spell cast on a given case, any case, permit time for the right evidence to surface, admit respite for the necessary bits and pieces to gather momentum and build themselves into a strong terms of testimonials, and allow the parties to a given case all the time they need for their emotions to sink and reason to rise and moral senses to dominate.

አለባብሰው ቢያረሱ (alebabesew biyaresu)

በአረም ይመለሱ (be'arem yimellesu)

The above saying would, in Amharic, mean those who do it wrongly are cursed to do it again. It can

also mean, if you do something under par, you run the curse of doing it all over again. In haste all things that are done to get it over with them, will at the end of the day come back to us compellingly such that we will be forced to do them again. This is exactly why *neut yinkaw* as a social philosophy sways wide and large among the Ethiopian populace. That is to say, if there is one thing you may think of achieving by doing things, in the absence of *neut yinkaw*, it is to get them done in less time than is usual. But the liability that comes with doing things under par is to do them over again, with twice as much time and twice as much outlay of resources. So what you make in the roundabouts, as the English proverb has it to say, you lose it in the swings.

የነቶሎ ቶሎ ቤት (yenetolo tolo baet)

ግድግዳው ሰንበሌጥ (gidgeddaw senbelett)

This saying would roughly mean, in Amharic, the house of the hasty folks has in place of walls thatch stalks. It as well means something as overwhelmingly essential as a lotus to reside in such as a house, will end up in being a house without walls providing one fails to learn her/his lifetime lesson as stashed in the time-proven philosophy of Ethiopian skepticism, viz., *neut yinkaw*. The house with thatch stalks may bear the weight of the roof above for some time, but not for all the time. When its bearing capacity comes to close the thatch stalks collapse and, therewith, so does the roof above, and so will the entire house, and so will the life it represents. In this sense, and in all other senses in which it gets vented, *neut yinkaw* is the farthest thing from the Pyrrho and Carneades' philosophy that makes suspending judgments on anything and everything for ever its hallmark.

Conclusion

Neut yinkaw is an Ethiopian brand of skepticism which I also tout as social skepticism. The be all and end all of *neut-yinkaw* is a philosophical admonition which has it to say that let wisdom cast its spell on it. Clearly it means, let wisdom cast its seasoned spell on any matter referred to judgment and sat up on by a given body of sages or elderly people the community deem appropriate for the matter at hand and pass judgment upon it without

fear of punishments and favor of rewards. *Neut yinkaw* as indigenous Ethiopian philosophy I as well dubbed in this research as social skepticism is noted for being an anathema to hasty generalizations, half-baked judgments that run fast only to play into the hands of injustice, bias, prejudice and partiality in all its varieties.

Neut Yinkaw doesn't however mean it is a view which holds procrastination in its high favor. On the contrary it is an anathema to everything and anything that falls in the category of procrastination. In fact *neut yinkaw* favors a stance that stands as a golden mean between the extremes of procrastination and haste. It is a view which emphasizes the indispensable need to suspend judgment on a given case, for that matter on any case, until there is sufficient time for wisdom to cast its spell on it; until dust of emotions, misinformation, one-sidedness and bias settles down such that justice will be done in manners that are bereft of partiality and prejudice.

Neut Yinkaw can in fine be defined as an indigenous philosophy of Ethiopian origin whose diagnostic marks are the farthest things from the classic Pyrrhonic skepticism. While Pyrrhonic skepticism is a position which asserts that we cannot know anything for certain turns out to be an inconsistent position that scurries its way fast into self-contradiction, *neut yinkaw* is a position which holds that judgments need be suspended only *protem*, until wisdom casts its spell on a given case so that an impartial judgment will have a chance to be passed on it without fear of reprimand or suspicion of misinformation and guilt, without favor of benefits coming in all colors of crime and misdemeanor. To wind it up, *neut yinkaw* is a social skepticism which rightly stands as an antidote to hasty generalization, as an anathema to bias of any sort, prejudice and injustice.

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