



Skepticism and the Emergence of Modern Epistemology

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ABSTRACT

Skepticism occupies a fundamental place in the historical evolution of the Western philosophical enterprise. And in fact, the history of philosophy reveals that Epistemology, a major branch of philosophy, emerged through the ages of western philosophy as a response to the position taken by skeptics. The core perspectives in epistemology have arisen either in defense of, or in opposition to, various forms of skepticism. Indeed, one could classify various theories of knowledge by their responses to skepticism. For example, rationalists could be viewed as skeptical about the possibility of empirical knowledge while not being skeptical with regard to a priori knowledge, and empiricists could be seen as skeptical about the possibility of a priori knowledge but not so with regard to empirical knowledge. Therefore, skepticism has remained a puzzling and persistent issue that has extensively defined the history of epistemology. Skepticism, within the parameters of the scope of epistemology is, therefore, a response to the question of what can really be known. And since the skeptics emerged in the plane of philosophy, all that epistemologists have been doing is to see how best to convince the skeptics that knowledge is possible and how to refute the challenge posed by the questions that skeptics raised. This piece would concern herself with the study of the skeptical position and

strategy, and its relationship with the development of epistemology. Its focus would be extended to the general forms of skepticism that question our knowledge in many, if not all, domains in which we ordinarily think knowledge is possible. This would be followed with an evaluation of the position of skeptics.

Keywords: *Skepticism, Epistemology, Philosophical, Ordinary Incredulity.*

Introduction

Skepticism occupies a fundamental place in the historical evolution of the Western philosophical enterprise. And in fact, the history of philosophy reveals that Epistemology, a major branch of philosophy, emerged through the ages of western philosophy as a response to the position taken by skeptics (Omogbe 2003). The core perspectives in epistemology have arisen either in defense of, or in opposition to, various forms of skepticism. Indeed, one could classify various theories of knowledge by their responses to skepticism. For example, rationalists could be viewed as skeptical about the possibility of empirical knowledge while not being skeptical with regard to a priori knowledge, and empiricists could be seen as skeptical about the

possibility of a priori knowledge but not so with regard to empirical knowledge (Klein 2015). Therefore, skepticism has remained a puzzling and persistent issue that has extensively defined the history of epistemology.

This notwithstanding, by epistemology, it is meant a branch of philosophy that is concerned with the study of the nature of human knowledge, its origin, its scope, its limits, its justification, its reliability or otherwise its certainty. It is an attempt by knowledge to take a critical look at itself so as to justify itself. This would involve questions like: what does it mean to say that someone knows, or fails to know, something? This is a matter of understanding what knowledge is, and how to distinguish between cases in which someone knows

something and cases in which someone does not know something. It raises questions too as to how much do we, or can we, know? How can we use our reason, our senses, the testimony of others, and other resources to acquire knowledge? Are there limits to what we can know? (Knight 2012) These major inquiries in epistemology emerged as a result of the positions taken by skeptics regarding the certainty of knowledge.

Skepticism, within the parameters of the scope of epistemology is, therefore, a response to the question of what can really be known. And since the skeptics emerged in the plane of philosophy, all that epistemologists have been doing is to see how best to convince the skeptics that knowledge is possible and how to refute the challenge posed by the questions that skeptics raised. This piece would concern herself with the study of the skeptical position and strategy. Its focus would be extended to the *general* forms of skepticism that question our knowledge in many, if not all, domains in which we ordinarily think knowledge is possible. This would be followed with an evaluation of the position of skeptics. This notwithstanding, what is skepticism?

THE ETYMOLOGY AND MEANING OF SCEPTICISM

Skepticism is from the Latin *scepticus*, in plural *Sceptici* which means “the sect of Skeptics”. It also has its roots in the Ancient Greek *skeptikós*, which means “thoughtful, inquiring”. However, skepticism means doubt, or the denial of the possibility of knowledge. Hepburn (1969) argues that it covers a wide range of attitudes, claims, standpoints, ranging from a general intellectual wariness and caution to a wholesome distrust of reasoning procedures. It can take the tone of suspending judgment when evidence is little or rejecting a number of methods of inquiry or argument, or questioning the knowledge of the minds of others. Thus, this would mean that skepticism is not just the name of a single philosophical position, for every philosophical position ought to involve some degree of skepticism in the sense of the serious scrutiny of what is normally taken for granted or held dogmatically.

These philosophers categorized as skeptics have raised questions as regards the possibility of knowing anything or some things for certain.

They raise doubts as to whether there is such a thing as true and certain knowledge. They have also questioned the possibility of the human person attaining the knowledge that is true and certain (Omoregbe 2001). It was from this background of the denial of the possibility of knowledge that epistemology began to develop. This is because, if I say that I know something and you say that I am not certain of what I know, I would be challenged to prove the certainty of what I claim to know. What leads most skeptics to begin to examine and then eventually to be at a loss as to what one should believe, if anything, is the fact of widespread and seemingly endless disagreement regarding issues of fundamental importance (Thorsrud, 2017). While the position of skeptics could be ridiculous at some point, they have played a very important role in the history of philosophy, namely, the role of critics of knowledge. As a school of thought, it is instrumental to the birth of modern epistemology and modern philosophy (Sosa 1999).

FROM ORDINARY INCREDULITY TO PHILOSOPHICAL SKEPTICISM

In a discourse of this kind, it is necessary to make a distinction between philosophical skepticism and ordinary skepticism. This distinction is very necessary as it contributes greatly to the conceptual clarification of the concept 'skepticism'. An understanding of an ordinary credulity, otherwise known as an ordinary case of being skeptical, better goes with simple examples. What might be considered an ordinary credulity, in juxtaposition to philosophical skepticism is, for instance, if at a birthday party attended by two twin brothers, Anthony and Francis, my cousin comes to tell me that he saw Anthony with the celebrant taking pictures, while I know that the twin brothers are identical and that I only saw Francis not Anthony taking pictures with the celebrant. I could doubt the certainty of my cousin's knowledge, since it's a great possibility that he could have easily mistaken Anthony for Francis. This is considered to be an ordinary skepticism because it deals with a specific issue here, being the identification of Anthony.

Philosophical skepticism is doubt about whether we have *knowledge* in certain areas where we think we have knowledge, e.g., whether there is a

God, or whether there is anything good or bad, or whether we can know what goes on in the minds of other people (local skepticism) or whether we have any knowledge at all (global skepticism).

CATEGORIZATIONS OF PHILOSOPHICAL SKEPTICISM

There are different categorizations of philosophical skepticism. Sosa (1999) avers that skepticism could be categorized *Partial* if it is restricted to particular fields of beliefs or propositions. It could be categorized *Total* if there are no restrictions as regards the beliefs or propositions. Total skepticism, according to Taliaferro and Marty (2010) is always problematic as it projects skepticism universally. It involves very radical claims that reach almost breath-taking propositions.

Skepticism could also be considered *Practical* if it is an attitude that deliberately withholds belief and disbelief, usually accompanied by a recommendation for people to do the same. This categorization could as well be partial or total, pending on the scope of disbelief. However, it could also be categorized as *Theoretical* if it is committed to the belief that there is no knowledge of a certain kind or certain kinds. Theoretical skepticism could be further categorized into *Moderate and Total*, if it holds that there is no certain super-knowledge or super-justified belief whatsoever, not even in mathematics or logic. It could be *Radical and Total* if it holds that there is no such thing as ordinary knowledge or justified belief. Theoretical skepticism can also be considered *Moderate and Partial* if it holds that there is no certain super-knowledge of a certain kind or specific kinds. It could also be categorized *Radical and Partial* if it holds that there isn't any ordinary knowledge of a certain kind or certain kinds.

Further categorizations of philosophical skepticism

1. **Sense Skepticism:** This is the denial or doubt that the senses can give us genuine knowledge. The German rationalists belong to this group of sceptics.
2. **Moral Skepticism:** This is a theory which holds that no one has any moral knowledge, that it's either non-existence or unattainable. We cannot know anything for sure so stop striving at absolute truth.

3. **Theological Skepticism:** A theological skeptics raised doubts regarding the possibility of knowledge about any god(s). This is scepticism regarding faith-based claims. It does not necessarily imply either atheism or agnosticism. The logical positivists belong to this group of sceptics.
4. **Metaphysical Skepticism:** This is a type of scepticism that denies any form of metaphysical knowledge. This is the act of doubting the claim of a particular person to knowledge about anything beyond the physical to provide us with knowledge. Logical positivism also belongs here.

SKEPTICISM AND THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

Skepticism Emerged In the history of western philosophy with the arrival of the Sophists in the 5th century BC. Before the Sophists, Omoregbe (1997) observes that philosophy was only concerned with the cosmos, however, with the Sophists, there was a change in direction and focus to society. They questioned the foundations of traditional religion, morality and cast doubts on the real existence of the gods. They were skeptical of the possibility of knowing anything for certain, and as relativists, they denied the existence of universal and objective truths.

While Protagoras (5c B.C.E) denied the possibility of objective realities, since man is the measure of all things, Gorgias (483—375 B.C.E.) denied the possibility of knowing anything for certain, for he held that nothing exists and if anything does exist it cannot be known. Thus, Protagoras was a partial skeptic, Gorgias was a total or universal skeptic. Toeing the path of partial skepticism, Pyrrho of Elis (360-270 B.C.E) argued that we cannot know anything for certain, because the human mind cannot penetrate the inner nature of reality. He declared that sense experience cannot give us true knowledge. To do so, our sense data must agree with their objects. But if we can never get outside of sensation in order that our minds may penetrate into their inner nature, how can we obtain true

knowledge? Furthermore, rational argument cannot give us knowledge because for every argument, there is a counterargument and the two opposing positions cancelled each other. Hence, we cannot know the nature of things; all we can confidently talk about are experiences. These men among others were radicals and revolutionaries, and they questioned the foundations of things that were taken for granted.

Socrates (469-399 BCE) claimed that he knew one and only one thing: "that he knew nothing". Thus, rather than making assertions or opinions, he set about questioning people who claimed to have knowledge, ostensibly for the purpose of learning from them. Although he never claimed that knowledge is impossible, he never claimed to have discovered any piece of knowledge whatsoever, even at his death. Plato (427-347 BCE), the disciple of Socrates, although rejected the relativism and skepticism of the Sophists, by emphasizing the possibility of universal knowledge, he, however, fell into a new skepticism by arguing that true knowledge cannot be acquired through the senses.

In the third century, Skepticism found its way into Plato's Academy through Arcesilaus (316-241 BCE) who handed over the Academy to Carneades of Cyrene. He doubted the possibility of knowledge. Carneades (214-129 BCE) was doubtful about the possibility of arriving at the truth through syllogistic arguments; this is because its propositions are based on assumptions. And to prove the assumptions right, it would be necessary to use other propositions still based on assumptions, and this would continue *ad infinitum*. This continued in the Academy until the first century when Antiochus became the head of the academy and argued that skeptics were contradicting themselves, on the basis that anyone who claims to know something and yet believes that one cannot know anything is contradicting himself.

In the second century, skepticism was revived by Aenesidemus of Knossos (1st Century). He presented the following arguments to justify the position of skepticism. (1) Differences between types of living being imply differences in ideas of these objects. (2) Different structures of the senses imply different ideas. For example, something may smell awful, but tastes alright. (3) Differences in our various stages, e.g. Childhood, youth and old age imply different ideas. (4) Difference in perspectives

imply different views. For example, a stick in the water appears bent. (5) The objects of perception are always presented to us through a medium, e.g., through air and never in their impurity. (6) Differences in perception, due to differences in quality imply differences in ideas. (7) Different ways of life, laws and systems imply different ideas. These factors, Aenesidemus argued show that there can be no objectivity, universal knowledge, no absolute truth or certainty about anything. Skepticism continued into the third century with the support of Sextus Empiricus (160-210AD) who furthered the septic position. Even until the fourth century, skepticism was still thriving beautifully well.

Reacting to the skepticism of his time, Antiochus of Ascalon (125-68AD) maintained that the intellect has in itself a test by which it could distinguish truth from falsehood or discern between the images arising from actual object and conceptions that had no corresponding reality. Therefore, anybody who claims to know that all knowledge is doubtful is contradicting himself for it shows that at least somebody can know something and this itself shows that the very claim all knowledge is doubtful is false.

In the Christian Middle Ages the main surviving form of skepticism was the Academic, as described in St. Augustine's *Contra academicos* (354-430 AD). Augustine's account of skepticism and his answer to it provided the basis of medieval discussions. Going back to the argument of Antiochus, he argued against skepticism (universal or absolute skepticism) on the grounds that it's a self-contradictory position. It is self-contradictory to say that a person cannot know anything and yet you know that a person cannot know anything. If you know that a person cannot know anything, then it means that at least a person can know something. And the very fact that the person who takes the position of universal skepticism knows that he exists, for he has to, to think that he knows that nothing can be known.

In Islamic Spain, where there was more contact with ancient learning, a form of anti-rational skepticism developed among Muslim and Jewish theologians. Al-Ghazāli, an Arab theologian of the 11th and early 12th centuries, and his Jewish contemporary Judah ha-Levi, who was a poet and physician as well as a philosopher, offered skeptical challenges

against contemporary Aristotelians in order to lead people to accept religious truths on the basis of mystical faith. The view that truth in religion is ultimately based on faith rather than on reasoning or evidence—a doctrine known as fideism.

In the Modern period, skepticism resurfaced through the *Meditations* of Descartes (1596-1650). Discovering that philosophy was full of doubts, uncertainties and controversies, he thought it foundational to begin philosophy afresh. His methodical method was strongly influenced by his knowledge of mathematics. He wanted to develop principles in philosophy that would be accepted as that of mathematics. He, therefore, wanted to demolish and reconstruct all the foundations in philosophy. He began by doubting everything that he has ever known, been taught or told, everything he had learnt or discovered; however, discovered in the midst of his doubt that he was thinking. When he made an attempt to doubt it, he discovered that it was undoubtable. Since he thinks, therefore, he exists. Thus he said, "Cogito ergo sum" (I think, therefore, I am). He, therefore, has discovered a truth which cannot be doubted, namely that he exists. He used this thought as a firm and unshakable foundation of the new philosophical edifice he set out to reconstruct (Descartes 1957). Descartes skepticism is basically about the external world. Stroud (2011) describes Descartes skeptical conclusions as implying that we are permanently sealed off from a world we cannot reach and restricted to the passing show of the veil of perception with no possibility of extending our knowledge to the world of beyond.

Descartes also posited the "dream argument" (one of the most popular skeptical hypotheses), that the fact that it is so difficult to tell whether one is dreaming or not provides preliminary evidence that the senses that we use to distinguish reality from illusion should not be fully trusted. In addition, he hypothesized the possible existence of an evil daemon (or demon), which presents a complete illusion of an external world (including other people) to the senses, where in fact no such external world exists. This idea morphed much later into the brain in a vat thought experiment, in which a brain's perceived experiences, while held in a mad scientist's vat wired up to a super-computer, cannot be distinguished from the real thing.

David Hume (1711-1776), the greatest of all British philosophers was born at Edinburgh. His skepticism is based on his determination to push empiricism to its logical conclusion. He argued that our ordinary experience suggests to us that things outside of us do exist. But Hume's extreme empiricism led him to argue that there is no rational justification for saying that bodies or things have a continuous and independent existence outside of us. This conclusion is an implication of his notion that our ideas are copies of impressions, and if they are, impressions are internal subjective states and are not a clear proof of an external reality. For Hume, since nothing is ever present to the mind but perceptions, and since all ideas are derived from something antecedently present to the mind, it follows that it is impossible for us so much as to conceive or form an idea of anything specifically different from ideas and impressions (Shaw 1994). It is important to note that Hume does not intend to deny the existence of bodies that exist independent of our perceptions. He is rather of the view that we are not able to prove that bodies exist, but at the same time, he insists that we cannot help assenting to the proposition. With this he concludes that all we have are impressions of things and not the things themselves.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), the great German philosopher expressed elements of skepticism in his thought. This emerged as a result of his Copernican Revolution and distinction between 'things as they are in themselves', that is, the noumena and 'things as they appear to be', that is, the phenomena. He argued that the human mind can only know things as they appear to us and not things as they are in themselves. This is because, things as they are in themselves are beyond the grasp of the human mind (Omogbe 1999).

Still in the Modern period, Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) developed the idea of phenomenological *Epoché* (in Greek to doubt, suspend judgment or to abstain from judgment) is a means of bracketing beliefs and preconceptions normally imposed on phenomena. It is intended to help suspend the phenomenologist's unexamined assumptions and ordinary preconceptions and judgments, so as to allow the phenomenologist to become attentive to a much fuller disclosure of what manifests itself and

how it manifests itself in experience, and a greater awareness of phenomena. It begins on a skeptical note like Descartes methodic doubt. This historical study of skepticism exposes the fact that skepticism has been part of the history of philosophy, right from the 5th century of the Sophists to the present time. Through the challenges it has been posing, it has helped the development of epistemology and philosophy as a whole. It remains a fundamental part of philosophy and an indispensable element in epistemology.

AN EVALUATION OF SKEPTICISM

There is a popular misconception of skeptics- they are understood as people who disbelieve things. And indeed, the common usage of the word skeptical supports this: "He was skeptical of the numbers in the spreadsheet", meaning he doubted their validity. To be skeptical, therefore, misconceived as being negative about things and doubt or disbelieve them. The true meaning of the word skepticism has nothing to do with doubt, disbelief, or negativity. Skepticism is the process of applying reason and critical thinking to determine validity. It's the process of finding a supported conclusion, not the justification of a preconceived conclusion. Skepticism is, or should be, an extraordinarily powerful and positive influence on the world. Skepticism is *not* simply about "debunking" as is commonly charged. Skepticism is about redirecting attention, influence, and funding away from worthless superstitions and popular misinformation, and toward projects and ideas that are evidenced to be beneficial to humanity and to the world. The scientific method is central to skepticism. If this is the case, skepticism remains an essential, and meaningful, component of the search for truth.

The skeptics have played and continue to play a very fundamental role in the historical development of philosophy, and particularly, the development of epistemology. In fact, the history of philosophy can be understood as a struggle with skepticism. Their contribution is found in the very questions that they raised as regards the varieties of human experience and the possibility of the veridicality of human experience. The skeptics have also raised questions as regards the variations that occur

in different perceptions of what is presumed to be one object and which view should be considered correct. Beyond the question of the certainty of what is the object of experience, there is also the question of the certainty of the criteria for the justification of what is known. If an attempt is made to justify knowledge claims by starting with first principles, Popkin (2010) observes that the skeptic questions the basis of such first principles? Can it be established that these principles cannot possibly be false? If so, is the proof itself such that it cannot be questioned? If it is claimed that the principles are self-evident, can one be sure of this, and sure that one is not mistaken? And can one be sure that one can recognize and apply the principles correctly? In asking these questions, skeptics have helped researchers to begin their various investigations by first resolving the possibility of possessing knowledge.

Notwithstanding the great influence of skepticism on the development of knowledge, universal skepticism is not a realistic perspective. It is untenable, logically and otherwise. Any attempt to formulate a skeptic position is self-refuting, since it will involve at least some knowledge claims about what is supposed to be dubious. The argument of the skeptic eliminates itself as well as everything else. According to Augustine, anybody who claims to know that all knowledge is doubtful is contradicting himself or herself. For the knowledge of such person that all knowledge is doubtful is itself an indication that not all knowledge is doubtful, for at least, the person knows that all knowledge is doubtful.

Moore (2011) criticized skepticism of the external world using a very practical argument: simply the raising of hands. This is as regards the skeptic position that nothing of the outside world does exist. Moore argues that:

I can proof now for instance that two human hands exists. How, by holding up my two hands, and saying, as I make a certain gesture with the right hand, "here is one hand", and adding, as I make a certain gesture with the left, "and here is another", and if by adding this, I have proved ipso facto the existence of external things you will all see that I can also do it now in numbers of other ways: there is no need to multiply examples. (p. 26).

Moore insists on this prove because it satisfies the three conditions necessary for ascertaining the certainty of his proof. First is because the premises that he adduced as the proof of the conclusion was different from the conclusion that it was adduced to prove. While the conclusion was that two hands exist, the premises were based on something different, through the raising of one hand after another and saying: here is one hand and here is another. The second is that the premise must be something that is, in fact, known to be true, and not just something believed to be true. This was supported by gestures- the raising of hands and affirmed after the raising of the hand. Third is that the conclusion must follow from the premise. The conclusion did follow from the premise, for after one hand was raised and the other, the conclusion was about to hands. Rather than engage in several arguments, Moore (2011a&b&c) uses just the raising of hands and other practical arguments to refute the skeptics as regards the existence of external objects.

Skepticism throughout history has played a dynamic role in forcing dogmatic philosophers to find better or stronger bases for their views; although their views look outlandish, the reasoning behind it hardly looks strained at all. Popkin (2010) asserts that it has forced a continued reexamination of previous knowledge claims and has stimulated creative thinkers to work out new theories to meet skeptical problems. Indeed, the history of philosophy can be seen, in part, as a struggle with skepticism. The attacks of the skeptics also have served as a check on rash speculation; the various forms of modern skepticism have gradually eroded the metaphysical and theological bases of European thought.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing has studied skepticism as the emerging point of epistemology. It studied the meaning of skepticism, beginning from its etymological meanings. It further distinguished between philosophical skepticism and ordinary incredulity. This was necessary in order to set the studies in proper perspective. In the same vein, this piece discussed the categorization of skepticism. To show how skepticism has been part of the historical evolution of philosophy, this piece discussed the historical development of skepticism from the ancient through the medieval to the

modern and contemporary era. The historical study of skepticism reveals that the skeptics played a very fundamental role in the historical development of philosophy, and particularly, the development of epistemology. Skepticism can in fact be referred to as the pivot or base on which epistemology and in fact philosophy revolves or stands.

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