

# The Heuristic Value of Scepticism

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## **Abstract**

*Epistemology is that branch of philosophy that is concerned with issues that bother on knowledge. One of the critical issues bothering on knowledge that epistemology deals with is the question of certainty and justification of knowledge. This is informed by the somewhat misleading tendencies of the sources of knowledge. This has occasioned a situation in which a group of philosophers known as the sophists have come to the conclusion that knowledge is not possible or that nothing can be known for certain. This is what is referred to in epistemological discourse as scepticism. Scepticism is the epistemological doctrine that denies (in the strong sense) the possibility and (in the mild or moderate sense) the certainty of knowledge. Interestingly however, it has been observed that rather than deny or destroy knowledge as it is probably intended or perceived, scepticism ends up advancing and affirming both the acquisition and justification of knowledge surreptitiously. This informs our thesis that scepticism is a theory of knowledge and an instrument for the advancement, affirmation and consolidation of knowledge altogether. We hope to establish this point through a critical and systematic analysis. Our aim is to establish the point that scepticism, which in a sense is criticism, rather than destroy, builds a system stronger for as long as it is done with an open mind.*

## **Introduction**

Epistemology is one of the traditional branches of philosophy that is concerned with knowledge related issues. Etymologically, it is simply put “theory of knowledge” having been derived from two Greek words: *episteme* which literally means knowledge and then *logos* which literally means theory. It is for this reason that epistemology is known as theory of knowledge (Omogbe, 1997: 35). Epistemology examines the capacity of the human mind to apprehend or cognize reality. The attempt to know reality is indeed an attempt to acquire

knowledge about reality which is itself different from the search for reality which lies squarely with metaphysics (Unah, 2005: 94).

Most literatures on epistemology discuss issues that bother on the various theories of knowledge, the question of how knowledge could or should be approached, types of knowledge, problems associated with claims to knowledge such as justification of knowledge claims, certainty of what is claimed and a host of other issues (Okoro, 2008: 1). The subject matter of epistemology generally is the nature and limits of human knowledge. All the above are problematic when it comes to what knowledge truly is. To that extent therefore, we may say in a nutshell that the subject matter of epistemology is the problem of knowledge. Epistemology probes into issues such as the ability of the human mind to know; what the mind is capable of knowing; the way the human mind comes to know; the limit of what can be known and the question of the validity of what is known (Unah, 2005: 95).

A very critical issue in epistemology as raised by the sophists is whether or not any claim to knowledge is possible considering the point that what is claimed as knowledge sometime end up not being so and whether or not any claimed knowledge is verifiably certain. The question of knowledge being suspect was first taken seriously by a group of Pre-Socratic philosophers in ancient Greece known as the Sophists. The Sophists were the first to raise very critical issues about the possibility of knowledge.

### **The Sophists**

The sophists are generally referred to as those philosophers who denied the possibility of knowledge. However, the term “sophist” which is a Greek word originally meant craftsman or artist. It was also used to designate poets as well as experts in the various crafts. The term was used to designate anybody that was eminent for knowledge whether theoretical or practical. It was in this sense that the term was used to designate the seven sages of Greece, Pythagoras, Anaxagoras, the natural philosophers in general and Socrates as well. The word therefore refers to whoever was devoted to the pursuit of *sophia* or wisdom (Owens, 1959: 155). With time however, the term came to be associated with those who made a profession out of wisdom and were devoted to teaching others their own brand of wisdom from one place

to the other and for a fee too. Some of the prominent Sophists include Gorgias, Protagoras of Abdera, Hippias of Elis, Antiphon of Athens, Pyrrho among others.

Although different philosophers under the name sophists had different strands of postulations, they however had something in common which is that they were very critical and doubtful of many of the traditional claims and beliefs which in a sense were assumed to be knowledge. They were of the position that there is no objective truth, but that truth is from a point of view and therefore relative. To that extent, they denied objective universal knowledge or truth. This is indeed epitomized in the Protagorean *homo mensura* dictum, “that man is the measure of all things; of things that are that they are and of things that are not that they are not” (Omoregbe, 1998: 60). The implication is that every man decides for himself what exists or not, thereby making knowledge of reality to be circumscribed or relative. Whatever the individual decides to be true becomes true for him. Gorgias and Pyrrho were somewhat even more iconoclastic in their position. For Gorgias, we cannot be sure that anything exists, and that even if it were to be granted that anything were to exist, it is not possible to know it, again even if such could be known, it would be impossible to communicate it to others (Ibid; 61).

For Pyrrho, we cannot know the true nature of things, we can only be familiar or get acquainted with the way things appear to us, not the way they really are. Things appear differently to different people thereby affirming the view that there is no objectivity in knowledge. This particularization of knowledge makes it impossible to attain objective and certain knowledge (Ibid; 68). It is this stand of the sophists that created the fertile foundation for scepticism. This brings us to the question of what scepticism means.

### **The Meaning of Scepticism**

A major defining characteristic of human nature is curiosity. This very nature has more or less constrained man to always seek to know his environment in particular and indeed reality in general. Interestingly too, the nature of knowledge is such that there is always room for improvement from time to time perhaps partly due to the point that things, as Heraclitus postulated are perpetually in a state of flux

(Russell, 1961: 59). By virtue of this possibility of improvement, some have argued that it is impossible to know anything and that even if anything could be known, it cannot be certain. Here lies the critical position of scepticism.

Moreover, it has been argued that scepticism centres on arguments and that it rests squarely in the realm of propositions. In furtherance of this, Dancy (1985: 7) says

Scepticism in its most interesting form always depends on an argument; the better the argument, the stronger the scepticism it generates. Since it depends on an argument, it must be able to be expressed as a conclusion. The sceptical conclusion is that knowledge is impossible. No one does know, because no one can know.

The dictionary and general understanding of the word scepticism is simply put, doubt. The American Heritage College Dictionary (1997: 1276) described scepticism (otherwise spelt skepticism) as “The doctrine that absolute knowledge is impossible and that inquiry must be a process of doubting in order to acquire approximate or relative certainty”. If scepticism is denial, then it must be denial of something. Scepticism is the denial of what is claimed and whatever is claimed intrinsically implies knowledge of some sort as it must have to be what one knows that he or she asserts. So, scepticism invariably amounts to or presupposes the denial of knowledge ordinarily. Barry Stroud (2008: 7) posits that scepticism is the conclusion that no one knows anything about the world around us.

Omeregbe (1998: 8) says “Scepticism is doubt, or the denial of the possibility of knowledge. Knowledge implies certainty. To claim to know something implies being sure or being certain about that thing. If a person is not sure of anything he cannot claim to know it”.

The Dictionary of Philosophy conceptualizes scepticism as

A proposition about the limitations of knowledge: that no knowledge at all or that no absolute, unquestionable,

trustworthy, certain, complete, or perfect knowledge (or rationally justifiable belief) is attainable by man or that such is not attainable by any knower; or that none of these kinds of knowledge, if attained, would be recognizable as such; or that no such knowledge is attainable about certain subjects,... e.g., questions about existence, ultimate reality, or the existence or nature of certain entities...e.g., other selves, values, an external world, or causal connections...; or that one or more or all of these types of knowledge is not attainable by certain methods or media” (Runes,1981: 277-278).

Somehow, philosophers who share this view or orientation have been classified into a school sort of and the sceptical school has been variously nicknamed. According to Stumpf (2003: 160),

The skeptical school is also called the “Seeking School”, from the spirit of research and examination; the “Suspending School”, from the condition of mind in which one is left after the search, in regard to the things that he has examined; and the “Doubting School”, either because, as some say, the skeptics doubt and are seeking in regard to everything, or because they never know whether to deny or affirm. It is also called the Pyrrhonian School, because Pyrrho appears to us the best representative of skepticism, and is more prominent than all who before him occupied themselves with it.

From the above accounts, it becomes clear and unassuming that scepticism is the denial of knowledge; it is the denial of the possibility of knowledge, and that should knowledge of any kind be possible, such cannot be communicated to others, and even if it is by any means capable of being communicated, such knowledge cannot be certain. To that extent therefore, scepticism could be said to be an epistemological theory that presupposes that nothing can be known or that nothing is knowable, and should anything be knowable, it cannot be certain. So, knowledge, according to scepticism is either impossible or uncertain.

However, scepticism is not just an epistemological theory because it is discussed in the domain of epistemology as rejection or denial of the possibility of knowing, but it is an epistemological theory because it itself theorises on the impossibility of knowledge which is itself a form of knowledge. To say that it is impossible to know is a form of knowledge claim, because it is the knowledge of the inability or impossibility to know. In other words, it is an epistemological theory that on one hand denies the possibility of knowing and on the other hand affirms the knowledge of the impossibility of knowing. It is knowledge to claim that one cannot know. At least the sceptist knows that he doubts that one cannot know.

It is in this sense of knowing perhaps that the initial idea of scepticism, essentially as it pertains to the ancient Greek philosophers like Gorgias, Pyrrho and the likes, was a total denial of the entire gamut of knowledge. At the same time, it is doubtful if that was the intention, as the sophists who were the main proponents of scepticism were at the same time actually engaged in itinerant pedagogical works, teaching some of the Athenian youth whose parents could afford the fee. If truly they were of the candid position that knowledge was impossible to acquire, what then were they teaching those children their parents paid them to teach? Even if we were to grant that they were simply teaching them some of the things they believed such as the subjectivity of knowledge, it would still amount to some form of contradiction in the sense that since one can only have relative knowledge about reality, whatever they were paid to teach the youth would be meaningless as it would amount to communicating what is known by the teacher which the sceptic claimed cannot be communicated and it would equally amount to knowing the perspective of the teacher since it is impossible to teach someone what you do not know. In any case, should we even grant that the whole thing about scepticism was the destruction of epistemology, to what extent can we then say that scepticism is successful in this voyage?

### **The Value of Scepticism to Knowledge**

It is our candid opinion that scepticism has not been able to successfully deny the possibility of knowledge, if anything, it has even affirmed knowledge. Bewaji (2007: 90) even acknowledged the utility value of scepticism to intellectual and practical life. The starting point

of this position would be the history of knowledge discourse vis a vis scepticism. We need to understand what knowledge is to be able to appraise the success or otherwise of scepticism.

Thales, the first recorded Greek philosopher, was reputed to have postulated that water is the fundamental element denominating all things, that is, all things are composed of water. Different philosophers after him of the pre-Socratic period postulated different elements as the fundamental elements of which all things are composed. The trend shifted from cosmological speculation to concrete human conditions with different areas of emphasis depending on the epoch. The various periods in philosophy are notable for emphasizing one area of reality or the other. The summary is that they are one way or the other knowledge claims. Even after the emergence of scepticism, claim to knowing one thing or the other has not ceased.

Apart from scepticism being itself a claim to knowledge, it has necessitated the justification of what has been claimed by philosophers as knowledge. To that extent therefore, scepticism, rather than an instrument of denial of knowledge, has become a major instrument for the advancement of knowledge. In corroborating the heuristic value of scepticism, Omoregbe says through the ages in Western philosophy, the development of knowledge was more of a response to scepticism. In his words,

In fact, epistemology developed through the ages in Western philosophy in response to the challenges of the sceptics. Thus scepticism gives rise to the development of epistemology and in that sense it has helped epistemology to grow. If I claim to know something with certainty and you say that certainty is impossible I am challenged. I will try to prove to you that certainty is possible, that it is possible to know something with certainty. In other words, I will try to justify my claim to have certain knowledge. This is precisely what epistemologists have been doing. It has been the basic problem in epistemology, namely, the problem of the justification of knowledge. How do you convince the sceptic that knowledge is possible?

How do you refute his scepticism? Thus the sceptics have played the role of critics of knowledge. Critics are very helpful, they play a useful role in any field of human endeavour, because they help one to see weak points or faults in what one is doing. This is the role sceptics have been playing in the history of epistemology (1998: 8).

The above position clearly attests to the positive value of scepticism. Though it might have been originally construed as an instrument for the destruction of knowledge, it has eventually turned out to be a major boost to the development of knowledge, a gadfly. It could be likened to the biblical story of the killing of Jesus Christ with the hope of doing away with everything about him without knowing that it is in killing him that His assignment on earth would be successful and fully accomplished.

Scepticism is indeed criticism in a sense. The whole idea of denial is simply an attempt to disagree with a point or a claim with the hope or expectation that the claimant of the piece of knowledge would go the extra mile to make an effort to convince people that what is claimed is the true state of affair. In that case, it is simply an act of criticism and a quest for the justification of whatever is claimed. It is a way of guarding against frivolity and peddling of ignorance and falsehood as knowledge and truth respectively.

To be candid, how would it have been if there wasn't anything like scepticism? Would ignorance and falsehood not have taken the place of knowledge, bearing in mind the dogmatic way in which some beliefs are held in some quarters and how unfounded some of them have turned out to be? It is only through scepticism that some of the beliefs held have been shown to be superstitious and superfluous.

Kehinde, in (Unah, 2005: 94) expresses her opinion thus:

The importance of scepticism lies in the fact that it attempts to reassure us of the extent of the truth or the validity and limit of our knowledge of reality. It is in reaction to the doctrine of scepticism that rationalists



and empiricists alike devoted themselves to the task of explaining human knowledge.

Just as positivism and indeed the whole of analytic philosophy was unable to exterminate metaphysics but instead ended up affirming and promoting it, scepticism, rather than deny the possibility of knowledge has ended up affirming and strengthening the possibility of knowledge.

When Gorgias the Sophist said knowledge was impossible and that should anything be known it cannot be communicated, what he was doing was advancing and communicating what he knew. Protagoras on his part argued against objective knowledge, but affirmed possibility of knowledge by individuals. So also was Pyrrho when he denied the possibility of knowledge and yet affirmed the possibility of knowledge of things as they appear (Omeregbe, 1998: 9).

Plato's "Theaetetus," is a typical example of how scepticism contributes to the development of epistemology. In fact, Jim Unah in (Okoro, 2008: 1) stresses that "Plato's dialogue, *Theaetetus*, is a good example of how to perform an act of epistemology". In the '*Theaetetus*', Plato (through Socrates) asked Theaetetus the meaning of knowledge and rather than tell what knowledge is, it was the object of knowledge and types of knowledge he began to mention. He came to this realization through a sceptical and critical process that he has only succeeded in mentioning objects and types of knowledge and not defining knowledge (Plato, 1973: 7). Not satisfied with the response and full of doubt about whether knowledge is the same thing as types of knowledge, Theaetetus came to the realization that he was wrong and came up with another answer, that knowledge is perception (Ibid; 5). The sceptical Socrates continued and even prodded Theaetetus further and in the course of trying to prove and even justify his position he advanced the course to a point where he again defined knowledge as true judgement (Ibid; 70) and to a better point where he defined knowledge as true judgement with an account, what in modern terms is referred to as justified true belief, a better position than the former. That might not have been achieved if Socrates was not sceptical about the earlier definitions. To that extent, scepticism adds value to epistemology as it facilitates justification of knowledge.

In the modern period, Descartes presents a typical case of how scepticism enriches epistemology. Driven by the desire to end the controversies and uncertainties that herald philosophical postulations and the commitment to reconstruct philosophy on a firm foundation of precision like mathematics he decided to doubt and reject everything he already knew. In the course of the sceptic attitude known as 'Methodic Doubt', he came to the knowledge that he that was doubting must be thinking thereby affirming his existence which led him to the conclusion, 'I am thinking, therefore I exist' *Cogito ergo sum* (Williams, 1978: 72-73). He came to the point of certain knowledge of at least his own existence when he says,

But I noticed, immediately afterwards, that while I thus wished to think that everything was false, it was necessarily the case that I, who was thinking this, was something. When I noticed that this truth 'I think therefore I am' was so firm and certain that all the most extravagant assumptions of the sceptics were unable to shake it, I judged that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy for which I was searching (Descartes, 1999: 25).

David Hume, in an attempt to take empiricism to a logical conclusion ended up in scepticism when he criticised the idea of causality by introducing the issue of necessary connection and universality which are not part of our empirical experience. Even Kant's things as they are in themselves (noumena) and things as they appear (phenomena) which follows from Pyrrho's scepticism is another strand of how scepticism advances epistemology in that the quest to know the true nature of things has remained part of man's quest.

Just like Descartes, Edmund Husserl's phenomenological *epoche* in which he bracketed all prior knowledge so as to attain indubitable knowledge is an instance of the importance and contribution of scepticism to the development of knowledge in contemporary time (Omogbe, 1998: 13). Scepticism has always challenged epistemologists; it has and is still contributing to the development of knowledge. Any conscious attempt at inquiring into anything is predicated on scepticism thereby making it an epistemological tool.

## Grounds for Scepticism

A major ground for scepticism is the question of the very nature of knowledge itself and the means through which knowledge is attained or acquired. When for instance Mr. 'A' perceives a thing to be sweet and Mr 'B' perceives the same thing to be bitter, is it that the same item has the capacity of sweetness and bitterness or that the problem of tasting differently is that of those perceiving the object? How come there is relativity in perception? If Protagoras' position is anything to go by then there can never be objective knowledge and if there is no objective knowledge, then we cannot talk about knowledge outside the individual.

The challenge is actually with how knowledge is acquired. There are two broad schools in epistemology on how knowledge is acquired - rationalism and empiricism. That is not to say there are no other sources. Our emphasis shall be on the two main schools. Rationalists are those that hold the view that reason is the primary source of knowing. Rationalism which is derived from the Greek word "ratio" which means reason is the epistemological theory that knowledge comes primarily through reason alone. In (Unah, 2005: 97), Kehinde says "The term rationalism comes from the Greek *ratio* which means reason. Hence rationalism is the epistemological doctrine that reason alone through mathematical reflection, can lead us to the attainment of the true knowledge of reality". On the other hand, empiricism which is a rival theory holds that knowledge comes primarily through sensation (observation and experimentation). This is the knowledge that comes by virtue of the five senses of seeing, smelling, touching, hearing and tasting. Hospers, (1967: 122) says

you ... know many things about the world – that physical things exist, and what their characteristics are – by seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting. It is primarily through seeing and touching that we know that physical things exist: we see the chair, and then we sit on it; but all our senses on various occasions inform us of what a thing's characteristics are: we can see that it is red, smell its pungent odor, taste its bitterness, feel its hardness, hear it being struck.

Ordinarily, it would appear the senses are capable of leading us to knowledge. But considering the nature of perception which is through the senses and the point that the senses are sometimes deceitful and misleading thereby giving the wrong impressions to the mind to process, and bearing in mind the point that the mind is at least the mind of an individual and that it is the one that processes information to a level where it becomes knowledge in which case there is the question of the relativity of the product of both perception and rationalization with all the accessory issues of susceptibility to errors, the only way to be sure that what is claimed to be knowledge is worth the claim, is for the claimant to be subjected to scrutiny and the rigour of justification and for as long as such issues are still associated with claims to knowledge, scepticism would remain indispensable.

Be that as it may, can we then say and correctly too, that scepticism is denial? We feel strongly that scepticism is not the same thing as denial. Scepticism is simply put doubt. Doubt is certainly not the same as denial. Although Pyrrho who is rated as the best representative of the sceptic school was an extremist in the sense that he denied the possibility of knowing, it does not imply that scepticism is denial. After all, even Pyrrho knew that he doubted, which itself is knowledge. Scepticism is truly not denial, but simply trying to cross examine any claim to be double sure. All that scepticism does is to do away with dogmatism and gullibility. To that extent therefore, mere sensation cannot be accepted as confirmation of knowledge. After all, the senses have been confirmed to be sometimes deceptive. It was not for nothing that Stumpf, referring to Descartes, said that the senses are deceptive and that it is wiser not to trust them absolutely (Stumpf, 2003:167).

### **Conclusion**

Scepticism, from all indications, arose in the beginning with the hope of attaining tranquillity. The issue of perspectives and indeed the contradictory nature of truth no doubt got men of great talent somewhat perplexed and confused as to what to believe to be true and what should be taken to be false. This situation prompted questions and the questions were geared toward attaining tranquillity (Ibid; 161).

Our candid position is that scepticism is not denial in the true sense of the word. Scepticism does not deny appearance as it might be presumed. After all, the sceptic does perceive the appearance of objects since the sceptic is first and foremost a human being with the five senses. There is no way a sceptic would dip his hand into a fiery furnace of fire on the ground that he is doubting. They equally do not doubt that an object appears one way or the other, they simply question if it is as it appears. The criterion of the sceptical school is appearance. The aim of scepticism, considering this criterion of appearance, is to achieve harmony of the things that have to do with the opinions that people make and as well have moderation in the things that are imposed by life.

In view of the foregoing, it could be seen that scepticism is not absolutely aimed at denial of knowledge *per se*, but to ensure harmony in what is being claimed (knowledge). This ensures that we know what ideas are true or false so as to attain tranquillity. The sceptic is sceptical because he has met with contradictions and being unable to judge what the true case is decides to withhold his opinion. The sceptic tries to suspend judgement about whatever is being claimed as knowledge with respect to the anomaly between what appears and the things that are thought about those things that appear so as not to have any reason to be disturbed by any thought of misconception. The aim of the sceptic is tranquillity in matters of opinion and moderation of feeling in things that are avoidable.

With respect to empirical knowledge, scepticism is no doubt a serious epistemological theory and the seriousness of the challenge is the justification for our attempts to through the various challenges created by the sceptic gain the understanding that though avoidable, scepticism is important for understanding knowledge (Bewaji, 2007: 311).

We therefore conclude that scepticism is ‘doubt’ and not ‘denial’ and what doubt simply demands is justification from the one that claims one piece of information or the other. In the course of justifying what has been claimed, the claimant invariably goes the extra mile to affirm or even improve on the position. Scepticism is therefore a tool for the development, advancement and strengthening of knowledge.

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