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Skepticism and its Various Forms

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Abstract

Skepticism has appeared as a challenge to our understanding. It is not only a threat to philosophical and scientific enquiries but also an impediment to our everyday practices. If everything is dubitable and uncertain the search for certainty is purported as meaningless. The urge for virtuous action becomes futile if there left no universal moral code of conduct. This consideration has prompted the philosophers to meet the skeptic in some way or other. Thus modern epistemology has become “primarily an exercise in skepticism; the advancement and the attempted rebuttal of arguments which are intended to prove that we do not know what we think we know”.ⁱ Before judging whether skepticism is a tenable position or not - whether philosophers are well equipped with arguments to combat the skeptic or not, we should know what exactly is meant by skepticism. This article is an attempt to specify the logical geography of the term.

Key Words: skeptikos – dogmatism - bad faith – mitigated doubt- incurable malady.

By the term ‘skepticism’, we usually understand an attitude of questioning all empirical knowledge, opinion or beliefs which are taken to be true by almost all of us. We witness the frequent use of the terms ‘skeptic’, ‘skeptical’, ‘skepticism’ etc. in philosophical discourses. But there is no single unanimously accepted understanding about the meaning of any of those terms. In fact there is no universally accepted definition of the term ‘skepticism’. The term is derived from the Greek word ‘*skeptikos*’,ⁱⁱ which means ‘inquirers’. A skeptic is a person, who is engaged in the enquiry regarding the achievements that we usually claim to have attained in different fields. He is eager to find out whether any knowledge has been or could be attained in any field. Thus skepticism can be defined, as a critical philosophical attitude that questions the reliability of knowledge claim made by philosophers and others.ⁱⁱⁱ So skepticism can be described as an attitude of questioning and challenging knowledge claims. A skeptic is a person who challenges our claim of knowledge in each and every discipline.

Skepticism can be viewed from four different angles considering its comprehensiveness, intensity, self-reference and articulateness.^{iv} By skepticism we usually understand a specific

mode either moral or religious or epistemic. But there is a sense in which skepticism signifies universal type of doubting. This comprehensive type of skepticism is more familiar as philosophical skepticism, which includes all fields of articulated cognition or discursive thinking. The skepticism propounded by Pyrrho can be taken as an illustration of this type.

Skepticism can be viewed from the angle of intensity too. A philosopher, who is ready to admit the distinction between more and less probable, but unwilling to differentiate true from the probable or false from improbable, is often designated as a skeptic. Sometimes the designation is applied even to that person who is not ready to concede the gradation of probabilities as more or less.

The claim of a skeptic may include everything excluding his own position; or it may include everything with the position he holds. When a skeptic claims that nothing can be known the question may be asked- whether he knows that he does not know anything. If his answer is affirmative, it is clear that he is not referring his own statement. And if self-reference is not there in his claim, he would be treated as a dogmatic. On the contrary if he answers in the negative i.e. if the claim contain self- reference it would be treated as of a different type.

Skepticism may vary at the point of articulateness. It is expected that a responsible skeptic would articulate his own position in words. But a skeptic may not go through articulation; he may not express his bent of mind in words. Skeptic of both type have been seen in the history of Greek philosophy.

Skepticism can be seen as a reaction against dogmatism. A dogmatist is a person who admits the veracity of some proposition or reality of some non-sensible objects without going through any rational inquiry. To Pyrrho, a dogmatist is a person who wishes to affirm or deny the reality of some non-evident things whimsically or irrationally.^v The expression dogmatism is also used by Kant in his '*Critique of Pure Reason*'. By dogmatism there Kant understood that procedure in which without considering his own ability, the pure reason puts his conviction on some objects or shows its allegiance to the belief that it is possible to make progress with pure knowledge on the basis of concepts only. This process is called dogmatic, as without considering in what way or by what reason it has come into possession of concepts the reason has long been in the habit of conceiving the conviction. Practice of this type of dogmatism is said to be seen in the philosophy of Benedict Spinoza, as without giving any prior justification in favour of his metaphysical presuppositions Spinoza purported to present a list of several axioms in his *Ethics*. Practice of dogmatism is also witnessed in the attitude of hardcore empiricist and rationalist. Advocates of both schools have claimed their position as undoubtedly and incorrigibly true (closing their eyes to the fact of experience). Taking reason or intellect as the only source of knowledge the rationalists has ignored the contribution of experience to the body of knowledge. On the other hand, recognizing experience as the only source of knowledge, the extreme empiricist like Hume, presumes it dogmatically that knowledge cannot surpass the limit of experience.

These total allegiances, either to reason or to experience as Kant thinks would be treated as dogmatic.

The attitude of these total allegiance to any opinion, school or ideology, sometimes designated as “bad faith”, act as an impediment to the path of rational enquiry and so it is treated as dangerous practice in the field of thought and usage. A dogmatist never questions or challenges the course of thought or action. He just expresses his own opinions about the reality or un-reality of some entity. No doubt arises in his mind about the validity of his own position or the veracity of the instruments of his cognition; nor does he ever inquire whether man has the capacity to attain true cognition at all.

It is the skeptic who put such questions in front of us. He inquires whether man is at all endowed with the capacity of obtaining any knowledge. A skeptic questions the possibility either of knowledge in general or any of its accepted variants. He suspects over the authenticity of the ordinarily accepted cognitive standards like perception, inference, testimony, memory etc. He blames the dogmatist for admitting the possibility of true cognition regarding some objects without examining the methods or standards through which the objects are claimed to be known. The attitude of a skeptic is presented beautifully by Ayer. As Ayer points out, a skeptic never claims that a perception or inference is false or illusory (for to claim some standard as illusory one has to admit some other as non-illusory); rather he charges that ‘these standards are logically defective or if not defective at any rate is logically questionable’.^{vi} Ayer thinks that when a statement is claimed as true, it must be included in any of these three categories- (i) It is self-evident, (ii) It’s truth is directly warranted by our experience or (iii) It is validly deducible from such a statement or a set of statements which are admitted as certain or necessary.

To dismiss the truthfulness of a statement the skeptic would either deny the veracity of intuition or he would explain the experience which seemed to us obvious as unwarranted; or he may deny the third possibility by claiming that the process of derivation which seems valid apparently is not really valid.

Skepticism has different varieties. As there are different forms of knowledge or purported knowledge, there are different forms of skepticism also. Knowledge is of different types, factual, formal, normative, theological, and the like. Most important of all knowledge is factual knowledge which is concerned with the information about the nature of the universe, and also the way in which it operates, in particular the way in which human beings react to his environment. Formal knowledge, on the other hand, is concerned with the formal mathematics, logic, and language. Evaluation of something as right, good, beautiful, dutiful etc. is the subject matter of normative knowledge. Knowledge of theology deals with the nature of supernatural entity, process of his creation and his relation with man and man’s universe.

In accordance with the types of knowledge there are different modes of skepticism.^{vii} A skeptic who cast doubt about the authenticity of information we said to gather regarding facts or nature is commonly known as a cognitive skeptic. The skeptic who questions the

reliability of the principles of formal sciences (like mathematics and logic) is familiar as mathematical skeptic. A religious skeptic questions and denies the veracity of the account supplied by the theologians and also the account supplied by the scriptures about the nature of deity, the process of genesis; while an ethical skeptic challenges the capability and acceptability of the moral codes of behavior.

Thus it is clear that skepticism may not always be of a universal type, it may also have any particular or regional form. Skepticism is a position which disbelieves in man's capacity to gather information about the actual world. A cognitive skeptic does not cast any doubt about the moral principle or religious presupposition, his doubt is directed towards material world as a whole- the world of fact and existence.

An epistemic skeptic usually throws shadow on our knowledge claim about the external world. He is not interested in falsifying the specific propositions that we claim to know with certainty about the actual state of affairs, rather he is eager to show those claims we used to make about the actual world as inauthentic or unwarranted. He purports to reveal that there is an unbridgeable gap between the claims that are usually made and the data, we provide, in their support. He insists on the point that we are not in a situation to claim those propositions as true.

The cognitive skeptic gets inspiration from the epistemologist too, especially from those epistemologists who advocate the classical account of knowledge. In classical theory, knowledge is defined as true and justified belief. Believing in the truth of a proposition, so far as the account is concerned, is not enough to promote a belief in the status of knowledge. The believer must have proper justification in support of his belief, or according to A.J.Ayer, the believer should have the right to be sure.^{viii} But the justification, a person puts forward in support of his belief, is itself subject to further justification. In this way the truth or certainty, the skeptic claims, remains unaccomplished to any human being. So, the claim of knowledge, which we used to make, goes into ashtray. Usually the skeptic does not challenge the veracity of any particular statement; nor is he eager to claim any particular statement as false. For he who cancels a particular statement as false is bound to recognize some other which is true. Rejection of some proposition as false is logically dependent on acceptance of some other as true. To disbelieve something as mere appearance is to take another as trustworthy. So the true skeptic is not willing to take the risk of making any distinction between truth and falsity; nor is he eager to reject some proposition as false. As his purpose is to disprove each and every claim of knowledge, he should not and need not make any cleavage between the truth and falsity of a statement, between experience-trustworthy and deceitful.

Beside the forms mentioned above there are several other varieties of skepticism overlapping and crisscrossing one another. It has become customary to make a cleavage between two forms of skepticism- theoretical and practical. The former is restricted to the world of thought or theory. This theoretical type of skepticism resembles with Hume's notion of 'Academic Philosophy'. Hume was well aware about the fact that human

understanding has its limitation; it can never go beyond the realm of probability so the claim of apodictic certainty, which we usually make in everyday life, is baseless. However, we are advised by Hume to refrain ourselves from putting the form of excessive doubt into practice; for such a practice, he apprehends, would leave us in a state of incurable malady.^{ix} Nevertheless there is a mild or mitigated form of doubt whose practice, in Hume's view, is extremely profitable in everyday life.

In his *Enquiry* Hume has mentioned another two species of skepticism namely antecedent or preliminary and consequent or excessive. By antecedent skepticism Hume understand that species of doubt which is the starting point to all study and philosophical enquiry.^x It recommends 'a universal doubt not only of our former opinions and principles but of our every faculty'. This type of skepticism is often used as a preservative against error and precipitate judgment. Application of moderate form of this type of skepticism is extremely helpful to make our mind free from all prejudices or presuppositions, and also in judging the situation from a neutral view point. In addition to this species of preliminary or antecedent doubt there is another, derived as a consequence of scientific enquiry. It refrain us from reaching any fixed determination. This type of doubt has been designated as consequent skepticism by Hume.

Skepticisms differ from one another not in degree only; there may be difference in their scope. In this connection distinction can be made between global and local types of skepticism. Global skepticism is a universal or wholesale type of skepticism which cast doubt not on this or that particular claim of knowledge only, rather it denies the claim of knowledge altogether. Sometimes this form of skepticism is described as philosophical. A philosophical skeptic never questions the way in which we apply our standers of knowledge; in fact he challenges the standers themselves.^{xi} In his view all perceptions are illusory, all inferences are invalid and all testimonies are deceptive. In short all claims of knowledge regarding external objects, other minds, past, future etc. are illegitimate.

In comparison to this vicious type, Ayer spoke of another local and partial form of skepticism. He is in favor of the expression 'scientific' to mean this type. A scientific skeptic nullifies the authenticity of disciplines like astrology. He suspects whether hand chanting can be accepted as are liable means of fortune telling.

There is remarkable difference between the approaches of a philosophical skeptic and a scientific skeptic. A scientist usually makes a distinction between the sources which are not reliable and those which are trustworthy. But a philosophical skeptic is not concerned about making such distinction. A scientific skeptic asserts that there are circumstances where a man's senses are deceived (for example when a person suffers from diseases like amebic hepatitis). On the contrary a philosophical skeptic suspects whether the exercises of those senses can at all provide us with any reliable report in any circumstances. In fact his doubt is not connected with any particular experience. He questions the veracity of all experience; and hence cannot have any support from empirical data.

The philosophical skeptic throws doubt on our beliefs concerning physical objects, other minds, past and present by showing that in each case we take help of inferences which are illegitimate and untenable. For example whenever we infer the existence of physical objects from sense experiences or others mind from his overt behavior, or past phenomenon from present occurrences, we actually go through an illegitimate process. The pattern of argument a philosophical skeptic uses to apply in nullifying the claim of our knowledge can be stated in the following way^{xii}:

In the first step he gives emphasis on the fact that our knowledge concerning physical objects, other minds etc. are all indirect and inferential in nature. For that knowledge we are solely dependent on the premises. In the second step the skeptic tries to show that those inferences cannot be claimed to be deductive in nature. In deductive inference the conclusion is deduced logically from its premises. But our belief in physical objects does not follow logically from description of sense experiences. Similarly no conclusion about our mental states can be drawn necessarily from the propositions concerning external behavior. In the third step he endeavors to establish that those inferences cannot be treated as inductive either. It is true that in case of induction we are entitled to infer something unobserved from some observed things. We are also allowed to generalize the claim from few observed instances, but it never permits us to draw conclusion about something from the experience of some others, belong to a different category viz. from sensible behavior to non-sensible states of mind. In this way by showing our inability to explain the inferences as deductive or inductive, the skeptic concludes that our claim of so called knowledge is unjustified altogether.

ⁱ Ayer, A.J. 1973. *The Central Question of Philosophy*. The Macmillan Company of India Ltd.: New Delhi. P. 1.

ⁱⁱ Edwards, Paul. Ed. (1967). *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Vol- VII. London: Collier Macmillan Publishers. p. 449.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rescher, Nicholas. (1980). *Scepticism – A critical reappraisal*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. P.XI.

^{iv} Ness, Arne. (1968). *Scepticism*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Limited. P. 2.

^v Empiricus, Sextus. *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. Translated by R.G.Bury. 1990. New York: Prometheus Books. p.20.

^{vi} Ayer, A. J. (1956). *The Problem of Knowledge*. New York: Penguin Books. p.40.

^{vii} Saha, Sukharanjan. Ed. (1997). *Essays in Indian Philosophy*. Calcutta: Allied Publishers Limited in collaboration with Department of Philosophy, Jadavpur University. p. 186.

^{viii} Ibid. p.35.

^{ix} Russell, Bertrand. *The History of Western Philosophy*. P. 671.

^x Hume, David. (1748). *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. With an Introduction J. N. Mohanty. 1999. Calcutta: Progressive Publishers. P. 119.

^{xi} Ayer, A. J. (1956). *The Problem of Knowledge*. New York: Penguin Books. p. 36.

^{xii} Ibid., p.76.