

Skepticism as a Tool for Philosophical Enquiry

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Abstract:

In this essay I would like to explore the history of skepticism from the Greek thinkers to David Hume, the great British Empiricist Philosopher, to show how skepticism has been used as a tool for philosophical investigation. Thinkers of different ages have time and again applied skepticism as an anecdote to all sorts of dogmatism i.e. philosophical, moral, religious even dogmatism in the field of scientific enquiry. My main purpose is to focus on Hume's thought to find out his specific role in philosophy as a skeptic and how he contributes in the philosophical thought of the later thinkers.

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The word 'skeptic' came from the Greek word 'skeptikos' which originally means *an enquirer*—someone who is unsatisfied and is still looking for truth. This original meaning seems to me reflects the true spirit of a skeptic who is forever unsatisfied in his endeavour for truth. Here we may quote Hume's observation on a true skeptic from his *Treatise* - "A true skeptic will be diffident of his philosophical doubts, as well as of his philosophical convictions; and will never refuse any innocent satisfaction which offers itself, upon account of either of them."¹

In the last chapter of his famous book *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* Hume has spoken of two types of skepticism- i) antecedent skepticism and ii) consequent skepticism. Hume identifies Cartesian skepticism as an antecedent skepticism as it is antecedent to all sorts of philosophical enquiry. Descartes applied skepticism to combat with the Scholastic dogmatism and used 'doubt' as a methodological tool in his search after certainty (Cartesian skepticism will be analyzed in due course of my discussion). By consequent skepticism Hume means all sorts of skepticism that comes as consequent to any philosophical enquiry. Starting with a great hope in their philosophical journey these philosophers suddenly discover that their path is not as smooth as they have expected rather it is thronged with doubts and uncertainties. Thus skepticism creeps in their thought. Hume classifies himself as this kind of skeptic and he

¹An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, David Hume with an Introduction by J.N. Mohanty; page No.43; Progressive Publishers; Kolkata; India; Reprinted in 2014; ISBN: 978-81-8064-208-1

describes himself as an Academic skeptic and his skepticism as an Academical skepticism.

In the History of Western Philosophy the name Academic Skepticism was associated with Plato's Academy in the 3rd century B.C. The Academic Skeptics raised their objections against the knowledge claim of the Stoics and declared that nothing could be known in the sense that we cannot claim that we can know things with certainty. The so called sources of knowledge, like sense experience or reasoning, are not at all reliable hence we have no standard criterion to determine the truth and falsity of our judgments. There is always doubt regarding any sort of knowledge claim, what we can utmost know is only probable. This sort of academic skepticism got its impetus later from Cicero's writings.

Another sort of skepticism which flowered during 360-275 B.C.E is Pyrrhonian skepticism which is associated with the name of Pyrrho, the legendary figure of Elis and his disciple Timon, 315-225 B.C.E. Pyrrhonists criticized both the Dogmatists and the Academics by upholding that they asserted too much—one asserting that 'something can be known with certainty' and other asserting that 'nothing can be known with certainty'. Hence the Pyrrhonists declared that it is better to suspend judgments, i.e. to refrain from asserting anything regarding any theoretical or practical questions. They tried to avoid all sorts of commitment with the plea that as there are conflicting evidence regarding everything under the sun so it is better to be satisfied with appearances instead of delving deep into any problems. This is a sort of attitude towards life and it was entertained till 200 B.C and in the writings of Sextus Empiricus this sort of skeptical attitude can be traced. In his Text *Hypotyposes (Outlines of Pyrrhonism)* skeptical remarks regarding all sorts of disciplines from Mathematics and Logic to Astrology and Grammar can be found.

The influence of Greek skepticism revived again in the Mid-fifteenth century onward with the re-discovery of the Greek Pyrrhonist Sextus Empiricus' writings and more particularly in the context of conflict between the Papal authorities and Dominican friar Girolamo Savanarola in between 1494 and 1498. Savanarola raised question against the authoritarian attitude of the Pope regarding religious faith and the problem of justifying a criterion for true religious knowledge. Savanarola himself did not know Greek but he was somehow aware of the skeptical writings of Sextus Empiricus and ordered three of his monks to prepare a Latin edition of Sextus' Text. He used Sextus' skeptical arguments to fight all kinds of philosophical and religious dogmatism and the criterion of truth settled by Pope in order to defend prophetic knowledge as the only truth. Later, a far stronger skeptical attitude was found in Martin Luther's criticism of the religious policy of the Church of Rome. Luther challenged the criterion of religious truth determined

by the Church tradition, by the Pope and Papal Council. He insisted on the truth revealed in the scriptures and the interpretations of the scriptures according to ones' own conscience. And surprisingly, in order to assert his new standard of truth, Luther used the same argument used by Sextus in his *Hypotyposis*. The critics of Luther argued that Luther's criterion would lead to anarchy as everybody would claim that what appears true to his conscience is the only truth and would thus give rise to subjectivism. The Reformers continued to assert their subjective truth as the real objective truth and their opponents' views as heretical. As a result, another skeptical movement started against Reformation in defense of Catholic Faith and the chief proponent of this Counter- Reformation movement was Erasmus of Rotterdam during the period 1520-24. In his work *De Liberto Arbitrio*, published in 1524, Erasmus severely attacked Luther by criticizing Luther's and his followers' stand of rational theological discussions, he suggested a skeptical basis for supporting the Catholic Church and thus started an anti-intellectual movement. In this book Erasmus raised question regarding the clarity of Scriptures and pointed out that human reason is not capable of decoding all the meanings of Scriptures. There are many shadowy parts in the scripture and especially the talk of the scripture regarding problem of free will is not at all clear. Hence it would be better to take a skeptical stand of suspending all sorts of judgments regarding religious issues and follow the decrees of the Catholic Church. Undoubtedly Luther reacted against this view of Erasmus by pointing out that no sort of skepticism can be entertained in religion. One must be absolutely certain of one's religious faith. "A Christian ought.... to be certain of what he affirms, or else he is not a Christian."² Luther insisted that 'rule of faith' must come from one's conscience which should be guided by one's understanding of the Scripture. But the Counter Reformists rejected Luther's claim of determining 'rule of faith' by the dictum of one's conscience and called him a skeptic who denied the age old authority of the Christian Church.

The Reformists' claim of the authenticity of the Scripture was again revived by Calvin who, in tune with Luther, spoke about the certitude of inner persuasion in religious faith. But here again question was raised regarding the criterion of determining the certitude of inner persuasion. Even within the fold of the Reformists question was raised regarding the authenticity of the criterion of faith. Thus from the 15th to 17th century religious controversy between the Catholics and Protestants was carried on and as a result an overall skeptical atmosphere was quite evident in European thought which was not restricted to theology only but was found in science and in different other fields of thinking. The Reformers' quest

²The History of Scepticism: From Savanarola to Bayle; Richard H. Popkin; page No. 24; Oxford University Press, 2003; Oxford, New York.

for true criterion of religious knowledge ultimately led to a broader epistemological quest: what is the basis of knowledge?

This search for the basis of knowledge led the Renaissance thinkers to take a skeptical attitude in their quest for certainty. They threw challenge against Scholasticism and Calvinism and surprisingly here also Sextus Empiricus, the Pyrrhonian skeptic, played a significant role. Michel de Montaigne, the French philosopher of sixteenth century, who was both the product of European Reformation and Renaissance, discovered the relevance of Pyrrhonian arguments for complete doubt in the religious debate of his time. In his famous philosophical essay *Apologie de Raimon Sebond* (written in 1575-76) Montaigne applied the Pyrrhonian argument of Sextus Empiricus in order to advocate the role of faith in religion against the claim that religious truth can be discovered by human reason alone. By comparing human beings with animal kingdom Montaigne intended to criticize the glorification of human reason and thus expressed a skeptical attitude towards man's intellectual superiority. Our truth claim is relative because what we judge as true in one moment may turn out to be false at another moment; hence it is better to accept Pyrrhonian skeptical attitude and abstain from making rational judgment regarding religious truth. He even criticized our knowledge based on sense experience and had pointed out that we have every reason to doubt the authenticity of our sense experience which so often yields contradictory results. Moreover, we have no means to know whether our sense impressions can correspond to the real object. Under this total atmosphere of doubt regarding our human faculties our only resort is to surrender ourselves to the grace of God and accept what Divine Grace reveals to us. Thus by accepting a total skepticism in defense of the 'Catholic rule of faith' Montaigne threw a great challenge to our claim of truth regarding the knowledge of the world and shook our belief in the foundation of scientific knowledge. And this had a great impact in the later European thoughts.

In the same vein, Pierre Gassendi, a thinker of early seventeenth century, severely attacked Aristotelian claim of scientific truth and criticized the contemporary scientific belief. He was also impressed by the text of Sextus Empiricus and took a skeptical stand against the contemporary pseudo- scientific views. By attacking Aristotelian claim of our knowledge regarding nature of things Gassendi pointed out in his book *The Exercitationes Paradoxicæ Adversus Aristoteleos* (Published in 1624) that what we know are only appearances as the qualities of things which are captured by our senses cannot reveal before us the true nature of things. Here he declared himself as a disciple of Sextus and claimed to accept two clues from Sextus : i) our knowledge claim about true nature of things is false and ii) we know the things as they appear to us in our sense experience. As our knowledge is

confined to sensible objects it is not possible for us to know the basic nature of things. As necessary knowledge of things is beyond our comprehension we cannot establish criterion of true knowledge. He even went to the extreme point of claiming that if by knowledge we mean knowing necessary truths about things then no knowledge exists. However, in his later writings Gassendi abandoned this extreme skeptical attitude and made a compromise between excessive Pyrrhonism of Sextus on the one hand and dogmatism on the other—he thereby propagated a sort of mitigated skepticism.

Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626), the father of experimental science, in his famous book *Of the Advancement and Proficiency of Learning*, reacted against this sort of skeptical attack on the possibility of Sciences. The skeptical attack on the reliability of senses is sufficient to prove that senses are not enough for the knowledge of the nature of things- we have to invent some aids or instruments in order to combat with the difficulties involved in our sense experience. Bacon pointed out that neither senses nor reason as faculty of knowledge is questionable, we have to invent the proper conditions under which they work successfully. But Bacon acknowledged the value of a certain sort of skepticism regarding the authenticity of our knowing faculties in so far as they are not modified by proper conditions.

This Baconian spirit of doubting the authenticity of our knowing faculties is evident in the writings of Rene Descartes (1596-1650), the famous Rationalist philosopher who is also known as the Father of Modern European Philosophy. Descartes' aim was to engage him in the search after *truth* and in his search for *truth* he used skepticism as his tool. As a Mathematician Descartes had a great regard for mathematical certainty and as a result he wanted to apply the deductive method of reasoning in his philosophy and in this endeavour his first step was to adopt skepticism to combat all sorts of dogmatism (especially the Scholastic Dogmatism). In his famous book *Discourse on Method* he pointedly declared that he would take recourse to skepticism as a primary step and he used skepticism as his methodological tool. In order to arrive at indubitable certainty he began to doubt all faculties of knowledge, even mathematical knowledge did not escape the sphere of his skeptical doubt. This sort of *hyperbolic doubt* enabled him to discover *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am) as the most certain truth—the truth which, Descartes claimed is intuitively evident to every person. This claim of absolute certainty of *cogito* was questioned by the thinkers of Descartes' own time as well as by the thinkers of later period. Seventeenth century skeptics attacked Cartesianism along with other theorists who attempted scientific revolution initiated by Copernicus, Kelvin and Galileo.

In the writings of Pierre Bayle, especially in his monumental work *Dictionnaire*

Historic et Critique (1697-1702), the culmination of 17th century skepticism appeared. He challenged both ancient and modern philosophical, scientific theoretical theories and showed that they all led to perplexities, contradictions and paradoxes. In order to undermine our reliance on human intellectual activity in all spheres he employed skeptical arguments against sense information, rational judgments and logical explanations as well as accepted criterion of knowledge. He upheld that we should abandon intellectual and rational activity and take recourse to faith and revelation.

2

Now I would like to turn my attention to the skepticism of David Hume, the early 18th century British Empiricist philosopher who himself has claimed his standpoint a skeptical standpoint. In the last chapter of his *Enquiry* Hume has pointed out the value of Cartesian skepticism as a remedy to all sorts of prejudices and dogmatic assertions. I have already mentioned in the first part of my essay that Hume called Cartesian skepticism *antecedent skepticism* as it comes prior to all philosophical enquiries. Hume thinks that this kind of antecedent skepticism acts as a safeguard against accepting anything without questioning. Hume has criticized Descartes' claim of *cogito* as the most certain truth but he appreciates the spirit of critical attitude in his search for truth. Hume has designated his own sort of skepticism as *consequent skepticism* as his skepticism is an offshoot of his philosophical enquiry. Being the most consistent philosopher of Empiricist tradition of Locke and Berkeley, he is the one who has shown us how skeptical consequences are followed from empirical investigations into the nature of things. Let us look into the philosophy of Hume to find out the exact nature of his skepticism.

In his *Enquiry* Hume has criticized Pyrrhonism as excessive skepticism and pointed out that this sort of excessive skepticism is not his cup of tea. He claims that nothing fruitful can come out of this excessive skepticism- if we have to doubt everything and suspend our judgment regarding all sorts of knowledge claim then it is impossible to carry on our lives in this world. He thinks—“The great subverter of Pyrrhonism or the excessive principles of skepticism is action and employment, and the occupations of common life.”³ (p 188) It may flourish as a theoretical pursuit of knowledge but the moment we want to apply it in our daily practical life we begin to feel its futility. Hume identifies his skepticism as *academic or mitigated skepticism* which lies in between excessive skepticism of Pyrrho and absolute knowledge claim of the Stoics. Here it should be noted that Hume has used the term *academic skepticism* differently from the way it was originally used. We have seen that the Greek Academics upheld that as we cannot know anything with

³An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, David Hume with an Introduction by J.N. Mohanty; page No.188; Progressive Publishers; Kolkata; India; Reprinted in 2014; ISBN: 978-81-8064-208-1

certainly *nothing can be known*. Hume never upholds this view that *nothing can be known*, he only thinks that regarding matters of facts or facts related with experience we cannot claim absolute certainty.

In the Fourth Section of the *Enquiry* Hume has talked about two kinds of Truths—*Truths related Relations of Ideas* and *Truths related Matters of Fact*. He has pointed out that the first kind of truths, i.e. mathematical and logical truths are necessarily true but the second kind of truths which are concerned with experienced world can never be necessarily true. There is always a possibility of their being false—“The contrary of every matter of fact is still possible; because it can never imply a contradiction, and is conceived by the mind with the same facility and distinctness, as if ever so conformable to reality.”⁴ (p73) Our knowledge regarding facts is acquired mainly from sense experience and memory and outside these two spheres we gather our knowledge from causal connection. I need not go through the tit bits of Hume's theory of causality as it is a well known to all. I would like to point out Hume's emphasis on the fact that our inferences from the causal connection regarding facts are neither intuitive nor demonstrative. In the Second Part of the Fourth Section with a detailed analysis Hume has tried to show that it is only on the basis of our repeated experience of the similar events we make causal inferences. He admits that we infer but do not reason--- by this he wants to mean that there cannot be any rational justification behind our inferences concerning matter of fact. In Hume's own language: “... even after we have experience of the operations of cause and effect, our conclusions from that experience are *not* founded on reasoning, or any process of the understanding.”⁵(p79) This lack of rational justification implies the possibility of falsity—any matter of fact can be false without involving logical contradiction. Thus Hume has shown us the skeptical consequences of empiricist knowledge claim---- Hume's skepticism does not uphold that we can know nothing about the world. What he has tried to say is that our knowledge regarding this empirical world does not involve *logical necessity*. Hume has repeatedly insisted on the fact that though we always make causal inferences on the basis of our uniform experience of our past (here custom or habit plays important role) yet we cannot claim that future will necessarily follow past. What we can at most say is that in so far as our experience goes we have not seen any exception in this case—fire always burns, water always quenches our thirst etc, hence we should rely on our past experience and infer. Bertrand Russell in his *Problems of Philosophy* makes a similar observation when he says in the Sixth Chapter of this book: “The most we can hope is that the oftener things are found together, the more probable it becomes that they will be found

⁴Ibid. page no 73

⁵ Ibid. page no 79

together another time, and that, if they have been found together often enough, the probability will amount almost to certainty.”⁶(p36)

Here we may turn our attention to the Sixth Section of Hume's *Enquiry* where he talks about probability and here he points out a very significant fact. He says that whenever we consider the probable occurrence of any event we have to take into consideration all the possible events which have ever occurred, obviously priority is given to the event which occurs in maximum times, but we cannot ignore the possibility of the occurrence of other events, even if, they have occurred only once or twice. This is true not only in cases of *probability of chance*, i.e. counting the probability of falling the head or tail of a coin or something like this, but also true in case of *probability of cause*, i.e. when we consider the probability of opium causing drowsiness. Here obviously Hume has considered only the causes where we have found exceptions, not the causes which uniformly found to have caused the same events. But this discussion on probability, I think, is very significant in the context of Hume's skeptical doubts regarding experienced fact. Hume has confessed, as a common man he always relies on his belief that future will follow the past without exception, but as a philosopher with a perpetual curiosity he has every right to enquire the reason behind such belief and he has found no such reason. He has raised the question: who can give me a guarantee that a friend of mine, who is known to me for quite a long time and who is known to all as a very sane and consistently reasonable person, has been overwhelmed by sudden frenzy will come to my place where I alone live with my servants and rob me of my valuable possessions and stab me? Hume says this is a farfetched possibility yet we cannot deny it outright. A similar remark has been made by Russell in the concluding chapter of his book *The Problems of Philosophy* –“The value of Philosophy is, in fact, to be sought largely in its uncertainty.....As soon as we begin to philosophize...we find....that even the most everyday things lead to problems to which only very incomplete answers can be given. Thus while diminishing our certainty as to what things are, it greatly increases our knowledge as to what they may be.....it keeps alive our sense of wonder by showing familiar things in an unfamiliar aspect.”⁷ Hume thinks, as a philosopher, he cannot avoid being a skeptic and hence uncertain regarding the truths of the matter of facts. He thereby claims his solution to these skeptical doubts is also skeptical. His solution lies in the accepting the *hypothesis of custom or habit* – it is only through this hypothesis we can explain why we can draw an inference from a thousand experiences which we are not in a position to draw from a single instance. He declares: “Reason is incapable of any such variation.....All inferences from experience, therefore, are effects of custom, not of reasoning.”⁸

⁶ The Problems of Philosophy; Bertrand Russell; page No. 36; Oxford University Press, New Delhi; 2006

⁷ The Problems of Philosophy; Bertrand Russell; page No. 91; Oxford University Press, New Delhi; 2006.

⁸ An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, David Hume with an Introduction by J.N. Mohanty; page No.89; Progressive Publishers; Kolkata; India; Reprinted in 2014; ISBN: 978-81-8064-208-1

Thus from Hume's skeptical analysis some points can be noted: i) our knowledge concerning experienced world can never be necessarily true; ii) the empirical truths or truths regarding matters of facts are based on causal reasoning; iii) there is a limit to our knowledge regarding the nature of things; vi) acceptance of our ignorance teaches us to be modest and helps us to know the reality better than any person who arrogantly denies the limits of human intellect.

In the last chapter of his *Enquiry* Hume says we must admit the limitations of our knowledge. Besides our knowledge of the Logical and Mathematical Truths (which are necessarily true), we cannot claim certainty regarding anything. Our knowledge of the empirical world are derived entirely from sense and observation—from them we learn about the nature of the operation of particular objects and are able to infer what will happen from them in future. In vain we pretend that we can know the ultimate reasons of all things—"It seems to me, that the only objects of abstract science or of demonstration are quantity and number, and that all attempts to extend this more perfect species of knowledge beyond these bounds are mere sophistry and illusion".⁹ Besides our abstract reasoning regarding quantity and number and also our experimental reasoning concerning matter of facts and existence we should be skeptical. We must limit our enquiry to these spheres without delving into the spheres that surpasses our reason and experience. Hume's skeptical enquiry warns us: Thus far and no farther.

3

In the context of above discussion I feel that the main contribution of Hume's skepticism in the field of philosophical investigation is an attempt to redefine knowledge. He has taught us to come out of the traditional model of viewing knowledge as absolute, rational, ideal and universal-- anything falls short of this ideal is not true and hence is not knowledge in the true sense of the term. We now learn that an empirical and relative (as opposed to absolute) knowledge can be considered as true and valuable in its own context. Thus an epistemic relativism has been introduced and established on good grounds. It is not Protagorean type of relativism which claims that what appears to me as true is true; rather it is based on the uniform experience of men and hence has a universal implication but which is at the same time relative in the sense of being true in the context of specific spatio-temporal reality. The truth of the fact that water quenches our thirst or fire burns is universally accepted but it is true only in so far as the contextuality of our experienced world upholds. No one can guarantee its truth in all possible situations in so far as we can doubt its falsity without involving any logical contradiction.

⁹Ibid. page no. 192

Later in 19th century in the writings of Soren Kierkegaard a skeptical challenge was thrown against the Hegelian model of absolute certainty. Kierkegaard, known to be the founder of Existentialism, claimed reason cannot give us truth –it is to be sought in faith and commitment. The 20th century Existentialist thinkers, like Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, claimed that rational and scientific examination of the world is futile and hence is unintelligible and absurd. In the same vein, 20th century Logical Positivists and Linguistic Philosophers like Ernst Mach, A. J. Ayer, Bertrand Russell, Rudolf Carnap etc raised their doubts regarding possibility of gaining knowledge regarding anything other than logical tautologies. Karl Popper went further and by pointing out the unjustifiability of the theory of induction raised questions regarding the authenticity of any theory of knowledge based upon empirical verification. Post- Modern thinkers like Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Richard Rorty etc questioned the objective, rational framework for any intellectual discussion. The Enlightenment idea of History, Language, Culture and Morality are challenged by them and described as *Metanarratives* which claimed everything to be complete, universal, unified and epistemically certain. They have viewed truth as relative and contingent in the sense of being contextual.

Most surprisingly, the Mathematicians and Logicians have also introduced a new concept—the Fuzzy concept. They claim that there is a grey area in between totally black and white—between complete truth and complete falsehood there exist infinite number of truth values. Thus the sharp boundaries of truth and falsehood cannot always be entertained; sometimes the unsharp or variable boundaries become significant and have to be accepted. Since 1970 onwards this fuzzy concept has been applied in every walk of life. Thus the epistemological relativism, which was established on a fair ground by Hume, is continuously influencing the thinkers of the later period even today who in their own style are trying to raise objections against all sorts of absolute truth claim.

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