

## Assess The Significance Of Philosophical Scepticism

In discussing scepticism it is important in first defining it. The Routledge Concise Encyclopaedia begins its definition of scepticism:

*“Simply put, scepticism is the view that we fail to know anything. More generally the term scepticism refers to a family of views, each which denies that some term of positive epistemic appraisal applies to our beliefs.”*

In everyday life the purpose of scepticism can be misunderstood. We are used to hearing the phrase “climate change sceptic” too often and will usually associate the sceptic with someone who denies the orthodox accepted view and may often dismiss such people with the derogatory phrase “flat earthers”.

In philosophy however, scepticism plays a key role in epistemological argument in refuting various scenarios where a certain level of propositional knowledge is assumed. A wide area of subjects can be questioned such as *a priori* knowledge, the nature of reality and the problem of induction. What is a sceptic though? For example, if we encounter the statement that all cases of Cancer will be cured within 20 years, this may provoke debate between opposing views. I may argue that it may be curable. However for the small minority of cases, unless some new wonder drug is discovered, these not will be curable or preventable. Therefore it will not be fully curable. In my case then I am a sceptic, because I am not fully certain in my claim to knowledge. No matter how optimistic I may be of a positive outcome for the argument above, I cannot dismiss any argument to the contrary. Others may disagree and tell me, that even with new medical discoveries, no matter how ground breaking, this is definitely not going to happen. The disease is just too widespread and there are too many forms for it to be wiped out within such a short time. It would be impossible. This view, although not as optimistic or positive as my own, would represent the non-sceptic's perspective, as those who hold it have no doubt on the matter. In epistemological terms the non-sceptic claims to have full knowledge and certainty.

We can say we have knowledge in epistemological terms if the following points are clear:

1. If I claim to have knowledge about something, then it must be true.
2. I, myself, must believe this knowledge.
3. I must be fully justified in believing this knowledge. For example I cannot claim this because of just a good guess, even if I have guessed it right.

The sceptic will usually question the validity of the third point above. The radical sceptic will go further, question even our ability knowledge (e.g. cycling a bike) and assert that we can really cannot claim to know anything.

Beginning from the level of claiming to have limited or no knowledge at all can be a good basis to start an argument from. This starting point is often used by philosophers in countering the perspectives of the sceptics, which in turn strengthens their own arguments. In *Meditations on First Philosophy* Descartes use such a sceptical hypothesis and poses the idea that our whole world and

reality could be just the work of an evil demon and everything before us is an illusion. What do we really know? He then counters this with his famous statement:

*“Cogito ergo sum”*

which means “I think therefore I am”. In stating this Descartes is claiming that the one thing we can be certain of is our own consciousness and thoughts. Looking at points 1 and 2 above it seems obvious that, to the individual, all knowledge gained at first hand through the senses, should be true. Point 3 is more difficult though once we try to question the reality of the world outside of our own personal experience. Although Descartes' claim that the world that we view could be controlled by an evil demon appears ridiculously improbable, it is impossible to fully disprove. It is here, in pointing out such unlikelihoods, the sceptic's purpose becomes apparent. It is then only appropriate to attempt to engage with the sceptic's arguments and not just ignore or dismiss them. We cannot logically take any knowledge for granted and therefore we cannot refute any opposing arguments out of hand. This relates to all avenues of enquiry and in challenging our assumptions, the sceptic can even increase our level of knowledge. In logically refuting apparently sceptical arguments this helps us define the limits of our own knowledge.

For instance we once thought the world flat until Columbus proved otherwise. We now accept this, but may counter that this was over 500 years ago and all our assumptions gained through progress recent time are valid. In the modern age of the twentieth century onwards, scientific enquiry has taken a more objective approach. However, even in the last 100 years we still see our assumptions challenged. In 1927 when a Belgian physicist, George Lemaitre showed Einstein draft proofs of his theory for the expanding universe, Einstein dismissed the argument with the comment:

*“Your calculations are correct, but your physics is atrocious.”*

This was because Lemaitre was questioning the validity of the steady state model of the universe, which was the accepted model in Physics at the time. Einstein himself, had found evidence of the expanding universe in the General Theory of Relativity, but would not follow his own train of scientific enquiry to its logical conclusion, as this would run counter to his own assumptions of the existence of the steady state model of the universe. Therefore he invented the concept of the Cosmological constant to account for such evidence within the steady state model of the universe. Only when the astronomer, Edwin Hubble, observed in 1929 that galaxies are moving further away from each other, was the new theory of the expanding universe more accepted. Realising his error, Einstein did eventually assist Lemaitre in correcting anomalies in his initial theory back to a single point in the creation of the universe and so the Big Bang, as it is now called, is considered to be the standard model of the creation of the universe today.

It is this example which can provide us with the answer of how useful it is to be able to question and doubt even our most fundamental assumptions. In accepting the sceptic's doubt we can reinforce our own knowledge of a subject, as this forces re-assessment of the facts. Like the case above, even those of the highest intellect cannot be an exception.

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