

## 1. Assess the significance of philosophical scepticism.

Without scepticism philosophy would be a list of facts. ‘The only thing I know is that I know nothing’, attributed to Socrates by Plato, is the foundation upon which philosophy develops. To question and doubt what and how we know sets up the subject. All philosophical ‘knowing’ begins with scepticism. All Western philosophy stems from the Socratic method: dialogue, the dialectic, critical thinking. No matter what conclusions may be drawn, there has to be an examination of pre-suppositions.

Modern philosophy moreover – emerging from the scepticism of Michel de Montaigne and Francis Bacon – draws on scepticism to advance thinking in the most dramatic directions, toward the counterintuitive notion that existence itself may be immaterial. ‘I doubt, so I think, therefore I am’ projects us to Descartes’ revolutionary position of denying any truth of the world apart from that in the mind.

Spinoza’s doubting of Biblical facts expels him from the Jewish community – ‘cursed be he’. Hume’s own sceptic foundations lead us to believe that nothing can be believed but empirical evidence, toward the stark reality of logically reasoned quantity and number, or calculation through experimentation. Kant’s scepticism of metaphysics; Hegel’s dialectic... philosophy *is* scepticism.

Non-Western philosophy also recognises the significance of doubting, so that Zhuang-Zou ponders dreaming of being a butterfly dreaming he is a man, such that when he wakes up, does he not then wonder if he is but a dreaming butterfly? Then there is the Buddhist disregard for theses, letting go of opinions; or the scepticism of Jainism which seeks many-sidedness. The universality of scepticism suggests it is hardwired, enabling humans to question the perceived structure of nature and thus manipulate it to ever progressive goals.

Where would we be without scepticism? Believing the unbelievable is where: keeping slaves; burning witches; administering poisons as potions; committing genocide; believing every false belief that leads to human suffering. Or, most psychopathically, denying that human suffering actually happened, or worse still, is not happening right in front of our eyes.

The scepticism of the scientific method is insuperable in that it doubts what we think we know, until there is enough evidence to make a claim, whereupon that claim can be doubted, until enough evidence is gained to dispute that claim. So can we doubt the phenomenal achievements of enlightenment thinking, of that wholesome modern scepticism? ‘Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive’.

It would appear that any assessment of scepticism’s significance can only conclude it to be fundamentally so. Nonetheless, by its very nature, scepticism demands that we are to be sceptical of scepticism itself – and that is my challenge here.

If we make a distinction between Pyrrhonic scepticism as the suspension of belief and Academic scepticism as the position of Arcesilaus’ claim that ‘nothing can be known, not even this’ then we might suggest that scepticism will necessarily lead to the radical sceptic view, beyond doubting, that there *is* no truth.

If we take no truth radical scepticism to its inevitable conclusion then did that blissful dawn not lead to ‘the terror’? Did the modernist project: that we can doubt all beliefs and create any new ones we happen to find appealing at the time to fill the vacuum; that the self is master of its destiny; that man can create a bold new future because we have overcome nature; did that not end up in the horrors of the truth denying, futuristic utopias of the Twentieth Century? Scepticism may start as a healthy opposition to the strictures of dogmatism but ends up in the crudest, most horrendous of dogmas.

While the facts of the matter may be debatable, philosophical scepticism can go further than arguing about truths to the point where even Descartes’ assertion of the self can be disputed, taking us into other dangerous territories. This sense of self is itself an illusion: Who do I call me? Can I see myself? Know myself? Such scepticism ends up rejecting Cartesian idealism for materialism where all our notions of personality, character, identity, memories, speech, feelings and the complex uniqueness of our personal essence is replicable in a bio-computer where these impulses are reduced to interacting neurons in a physical brain. We are not just dreaming, or victims of a deluding evil genius but brains in vats wired to a super-computer. Here, we end up as nothing significant.

‘I’, then, to be I, must deny scepticism as faulted on the grounds of its own dogmatism. I *do* know who I am at this present moment in time and space, even if I am full of assumptions and contradictions: I am. I am, you are, we are. This simple reasoning sheds light on the basic flaw in scepticism, revealing it to be a self-absorbing monster eating away at reason until it is consumed by itself. The reasoning of scepticism is that reasoning is unreliable, making the reasoning of no truths to be unreliable; so if scepticism is right then scepticism is unreliable and if it is wrong then any conclusions it draws must be wrong. Surely that makes scepticism insignificant?

To function, we must ignore the sceptic. With gratitude to Bertrand Russell, we are reminded that common sense is our starting point and we can accept what is reasonable for us to perceive with just a pinch of necessary doubt. G.E Moore’s insight that we don’t have to prove the external world is real to live in it dispels scepticism to metaphysics – where it least wants to be.

Scepticism, at best, is a challenge to our knowledge of the physical external world, not a stand-alone explanation of reality. We can believe something without knowledge of it and so be wrong – flat earthers. We can also have true beliefs based on false evidence – the earth is round because there are hills. Beliefs can evidently be true if they are reliably justified. Even if Gettier’s cases prove we can have justified true belief without knowledge, we are on the right track here so that when equating knowledge with truth, ultimately, I can say I know something is true when it is true.

We can accept that our perceptions can be wrong sometimes, but that does not undermine perception completely, since we have knowledge of illusions and we re-calibrate quite quickly when we realise a misperception, especially since science has made the world so real. Differences in perceptions can be compared and evaluated to see which are most reliable,

notwithstanding the case that we can agree on an awful amount of perception as being objectively accurate. In the everyday world, there is no reason to doubt our reality but for sceptical 'reasoning', which has to be a part of our ability to perceive.

My scepticism then is dependent on reality; it cannot exist without the real world and all the possibilities that could occur in it. To say that myself and all I perceive is questionable, does not deny it really does exist by a long, long way. The burden of proof lies with the sceptic.

If I were to walk around believing the Earth was going to open before me as a chasm any moment, or that a lion were about to pounce, life would be unbearable, and it would be unreasonable to make these assumptions. Perhaps I am subconsciously aware of all potential possibilities; my brain has evolved with all the possibilities computed. I know a lot more than I realise and I have taken it all into account to function in my immediate environment.

I know what I think so that I know what a brain is and what a vat is, based on their causal connection to the world and if I were a brain in a vat then all I know, caused by the supercomputer, would be that people are brains in vats and not someone capable of thinking that I was a brain in a vat. From Wittgenstein to Hilary Putnam we can use the meaning of words to defeat scepticism.

I have to know, the search may be infinite but that epistemological endeavour is everything we have. So when I said earlier that philosophy is scepticism, I realise now that scepticism cannot be foundational by definition, and that what I really mean to say is philosophy is the love of knowledge.