

# CERTITUDE, SCEPTICISM AND THE PATHWAY TO KNOWLEDGE

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## Abstract

*The present paper focuses on the epistemics of navigating the pathway to knowledge. It states the traditional programme of epistemology and the milestones of certitude, justification and scepticism on this pathway. It attempts an analysis of the various forms of scepticism in the history of philosophy as they are encountered in the search for certitude, truth and knowledge in the purest sense. The Sophists, Cartesians, Humeans and the Popperian sceptics were jettisoned. The paper then goes further to present the position that, though the above-mentioned variants of scepticism were harmful to the pursuit of knowledge, a given type of sceptical orientation could be accepted and employed as we seek knowledge. This variant of scepticism is found to be represented in scepticism and animal rationality of George Santayana. The position presents ruthless caution and rigour while man must not be pessimistic of the possibility of knowledge, truth and objective reality. The paper sees the project of knowledge as useful to the extent that it is meant to bring to the fore the conditions of fidelity and happiness as knowledge is not just for its own sake but, for human interest. The methodology employed in this paper includes conceptual analysis, clarifications and argumentation. It engages some textbook analysis aimed at arriving at a reconstructionist epistemology.*

**Keywords:** Scepticism, Certitude, Justification, Knowledge and Foundationalism

## Introduction

In the ideal detective story, the reader is given all the clues yet fails to spot the criminal. He may advert to each clue as it arises. He needs no further clues to solve the mystery. Yet he can remain in the dark for the simple reason that reaching the solution is not the mere apprehension of any clue, not the mere memory of all, but a quite distinct activity of organizing intelligence that places the full set of clues in a unique explanatory perspective.

By insight, then, is meant no any act of attention or advertence or memory but the supervening act of understanding. It is not any recondite intuition but the familiar event that occurs easily and frequently in the moderately intelligent, rarely and with difficulty only in the very stupid.

The present paper attempts a navigation of the pathway to reliable knowledge – a project that

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Frederick E. Crowe & Robert M. Doran, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 3.

is actually the traditional concern of epistemology. Notably, on this pathway to knowledge, as we navigate the path to attaining reliable knowledge, we are confronted with what may be referred to as two fundamental obstacles. These are the obstacle of attaining certitude and the obstacle of overcoming scepticism. One way of putting this inquiry is the statement by John Kekes that the notion of justification has become so paramount in the traditional project of epistemology that epistemology could be actually defined as theory of justification, rather than theory of knowledge. And so, the problem of justification is found to occupy the heart of the search for certitude in order to arrive at reliable knowledge. This problem combined with the question of scepticism presents the notion of knowledge to be rather enigmatic. For Bertrand Russell the question can be put simply, is there any knowledge in the world which is so certain that no reasonable man could doubt it? This question, which at first sight might not seem difficult, is really one of the most difficult that can be asked. When we have realised the obstacles in the way of a straightforward and confident answer, we shall be well launched on the pathway to knowledge, for, philosophy in general is merely the attempt to answer such ultimate questions, not carelessly and dogmatically, as we do in ordinary life and even in the sciences, but critically, after exploring all that makes such questions puzzling, and after realising all the vagueness and confusion that underlie our ordinary ideas.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Project of Certitude**

As mentioned above, epistemology used to be called the theory of knowledge. In contemporary epistemology however, the most significant feature found present is that the label has become rather inappropriate, it is much more accurate to describe recent epistemology as a theory of justification.<sup>3</sup> The shift from knowledge to justification results from serious doubts about the possibility of attaining the kind of certainty that knowledge has been taken to involve.<sup>4</sup> A dimension of the problem of certitude found to re-echo time and again is the question of whether our beliefs have a secure foundation. Foundationalist argue that they do; Cartesian foundationalist think that such beliefs rest on psychological states while, Mooreans make them depend on central paths of the common sense view of the world. Opposed to both are sceptics who deny that there is a secure foundation. At a different level, the problem arises because if our beliefs do not have secure foundation, then how can they be

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<sup>2</sup>Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1912), 2.

<sup>3</sup>John Kekes, "Recent Trends and Future Prospects in Epistemology", *Metaphilosophy*, Vol. 8, No. 2&3, (1977), 87.

<sup>4</sup>Kekes, "Recent Trends and Future Prospects in Epistemology," 87-8.

justified? Scepticism is the view that they cannot be justified. The problem here however, is whether scepticism can be countered by a non-foundationalist theory of rational justification. In all, the problem is about the domain of justification. The question is what sort of justification are relevant to the justification of our beliefs. Is there a uniquely epistemological justification, or must justification be based on non-epistemological consideration?

### The Threat of Scepticism

And so, the question of whether we have any knowledge or we are certain of what we believe to be rational and objective is always challenged with a sceptical attitude in epistemology in particular and philosophy in general. Our certitude of the world of Forms (eternal, unchanging object of knowledge) constructed by Plato also stands in for interrogation; while the sceptical approach towards the physical world stand in perceptual violence. The wonder in understanding the structure of the world, the cosmological basis of philosophy, though crude as it were having stimulated thoughts and observation. However, in the latter half of the fifth century, a sceptical movement emerged. Members of this groups are, Protagoras, Gorgias and Thrasymachus. With these philosophers the focus shifted from what constitute the structure of the world to man. Generally, they were extremely doubtful about the possibility of discovering anything that was really certain. They were referred to as sophist – professionals who make their living by instructing young men certain things that was thought would be useful to them in practical life.<sup>5</sup> Their emergence is tied to a socio-political situation of the Athenian state demanding men to acquire 'forensic skill'.<sup>6</sup> And so, intellectual skill or rhetorical ability was commercialized. Their attempt to equip the young who could withstand the nature and character of Athenian democracy gained acceptance with some and were unpopular with others in the city. The Sophists tenaciously hold that “the pursuit of truth, when it is whole-hearted, must ignore moral considerations; we cannot know in advance that the truth will turn out to be what is thought edifying in a given society”.<sup>7</sup> The liberation of man from convention – *nomos* – or what Nietzsche called 'herd morality' was at the fore of their endeavour combined with the desire for argumentation which usually lead to scepticism. Friedrich Nietzsche has admired them for promoting nature's winners to their rightful winning position.<sup>8</sup> To this extent, Gorgia one among the prominent figures contended against Parmenides unitary of the world of 'being' and, maintained that 'nothing exists', and this is

<sup>5</sup>Bertrand Russell, *The History of Western Philosophy*, (London: Pan Books, 1979), 73.

<sup>6</sup>Bertrand Russell, *The History of Western Philosophy*, (London: Pan Books, 1979), 75.

<sup>7</sup>Russell, *The History of Western Philosophy*, 78

<sup>8</sup>Catherine Osborne, *PreSocratic Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 114.

established by arguing that 'not-being' does not exist, nor does 'being exist'<sup>9</sup> Again, if something does exist it cannot be known by human beings. And finally, if something exists and is knowable, no knowledge or understanding of it can be communicated to another person.<sup>10</sup> From the premises supplied the refutation of 'to be-ness' in the second premise and an inability to express our comprehension of what exists characterizes his uncertain approach to knowledge. Moreover, Gorgias may have thought that since the sense impression of 'A' cannot be used to justify the sense impression of 'B' and, since our relations with facts are indirect and constitutes report proposition it could not be communicated.

From the foregoing, knowledge therefore in the strict sense is unattainable and, therefore man should not bother to seek what he can never find. Instead, the sophists insisted on following Protagoras's dictum that everyone should 'measure' matters according to his nature and needs, since man alone is the measure of all things<sup>11</sup> Consequently, in the *Theatetus*, Socrates argues that for one might commit oneself to even stranger conclusions, if one were as careless in the use of language as we commonly are in our assertions and denials. And upon such formidable maxim Socrates asked, "Can the same person know something and also not know that which he knows?"<sup>12</sup> How then do they claim to instruct people on worldly success? He then thought that it is like the blind were leading the blind since neither they nor the students had any knowledge.<sup>13</sup> Another figure readily identified with to have inaugurated modern skepticism is Rene Descartes.

Rene Descartes (1596-1650) a French philosopher and mathematician posed the most striking form of skepticism – a view that doubts whether any of our beliefs can be supported by adequate or sufficient evidence.<sup>14</sup> In the attempt to locate sufficient evidence, he expressly employs his analytical abilities to get rid of his mind all he had learnt (the exercises and engagements with intellectuals, cultures, literature and customs of other men), and he thinks that what he was taught for many centuries contained no point. Furthermore, the search for certitude led him to discard perceptual impressions. Again, he turned to other subjects and argued that it borrowed its principles from philosophy and so, were a shaky foundation that nothing could be built. The complexity of man's disposition to imprudence even in one circumstance constitute further doubt and such a man was not to be trusted. Due to this, he

<sup>9</sup>George B. Kerferd, *History of Philosophy, From the Beginning to Plato Vol. I*, Edited by C.C.W. Taylor, (New York: Francis and Taylor, 2005), 234.

<sup>10</sup>Kerferd, *History of Philosophy, From the Beginning to Plato Vol. I*, 234.

<sup>11</sup>Richard H. Popkin & Avrum Stroll, *Philosophy Made Simple*, (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 473-4.

<sup>12</sup>Edith Hamilton & Huntington Cairns, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato Including the Letters*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961), 2159.

<sup>13</sup>Popkin & Stroll, *Philosophy Made Simple*, 474.

<sup>14</sup>Popkin & Stroll, *Philosophy Made Simple*, 461-2.

withdrew assent from what is not obviously certain and indubitable and embark on a reconstruction of knowledge, from the foundations upwards. This project is contained in his *Discourse on Method* (1641), where he says:

For I have already reaped from it such a harvest that, although I try, in judgments I make of myself, always to lean more on the side of diffidence than of presumption, and although looking with a philosopher's eye at the various actions and enterprises of all men, there is hardly one of them that does not seem to me vain and useless, I cannot but take immense satisfaction in the progress that I think I have already made in the search for truth, and I cannot but envisage such hopes for the future that if, among the occupations of men purely as men, there is one that is solidly good and important, I dare to believe that it is the one I have chosen.<sup>15</sup>

As it was the proper time to deconstruct the knowledge he has acquired, the meditator having consciously analyse and dialogued within himself, arrived at certain principles and procedures to guide his thoughts. These principles were generated following certain assumptions he thought were foundational such as the certainty that mathematicians demonstrate and the obvious fact that an individual's architectural design is well ordered, combined with a provisional code of morals and indeed, an adherence to the four rules he resolved to constantly hold firm and observe. With this, Descartes confidently eased our reading doubt saying,

But immediately afterward I noticed that, while I wanted thus to think that everything was false, it necessarily had to be the case that I, who was thinking this (doubting impressions and all knowledge and beliefs held before), was something. And noticing that this truth – *I think, therefore I am* – was so firm and so assured that all the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptics were incapable of shaking it, I judged that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking.<sup>16</sup>

With this basic pleasuring foundation, the dubious foundation gained in his years of learning, the false beliefs held, the energy exerted on him by the malicious demon upon his perceptual dispositions were reconstructed for a new systematic foundation, an indubitable truth accepted to be clear and distinct. And so, existence was the justification he could not pretend about and the fact that “the thought of doubting the truth of other things, it followed

<sup>15</sup>Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, Trans. by Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), 2.

<sup>16</sup>Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, Trans. by Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), Pt I; 2, Pt II;11, Pt III;13, & Pt. IV;18.

very evidently and very certainly that he existed; whereas, on the other hand, he says, if I had simply stopped thinking, even if all the rest of what I had ever imagined had been true, I would have had no reason to believe that I had existed”.<sup>17</sup> From the principle and justification Descartes assented the substantial 'I' and the extended body. Upon this, Descartes reflected on establishing the source of his certitude – the indubitable knowledge considered to be clear and distinct. And so, he argues that overtime he has learnt to think of something more perfect than himself, and it is a plain truth the source of this knowledge had come from some nature that was in fact more perfect. And since this cannot be obtained from nothing, and I knew of some perfections I did not at all possess, I was not the only being that existed, but, that of necessity there must be something else more perfect, upon which I depended, and from which I had acquired all that I had.<sup>18</sup> The independent source of Descartes clear and distinct knowledge was attributed to God whom he perceive not to doubt like himself. Therefore, “... in all that is clear and distinct in them, be anything but true”.<sup>19</sup> This fixed indubitable truth considered as the Archimedean immovable point constitute certitude and high hopes for further investigation.

Consequently, we could however see that his sceptical attempt to prove and rid of earlier beliefs and truth was nothing but to show the unreliableness of those knowledge and their sources. His arguments emanated from a complex disposition of – doubting, affirming, denying and being ignorance of things. This led to a dependency argument to justify his philosophical indubitableness.<sup>20</sup> A variant of this classical skepticism finds expression in David Hume's discourse on the causal nature of the physical world.

The eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume (1711-1776), aims in his writings to do something akin to the Newtonian reductive explanation of motion to the study of human nature. This truism emanated from the thinking that evidently, all the sciences have a relation, greater or less, to human nature: and that however wide any of them may seem to run from it, they still return back by one passage or another. Even Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, and Natural Religion, are in some measure dependent on the science of MAN; since the lie under the cognizance of men, and are judged of by their powers and faculties. Accordingly, he emphasize that the science of man is believed to be the-only solid foundation for the other

<sup>17</sup>Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, 18-19.

<sup>18</sup>Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, 20.

<sup>19</sup>Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, 22.

<sup>20</sup>Hume in *A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects*, Edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge (London: Clarendon Press, 1978), 187, argues that the sceptic still continues to reason and believe, even tho' he asserts, that he cannot defend his reason by reason; and by the same rule he must assent to the principle concerning the existence of body, tho' he cannot pretend by any arguments of philosophy to maintain its veracity.

science and so, must be laid on experience and observation.<sup>21</sup> To arrive at this however, his discoveries laid a sceptical position of uncertainties about events and occurrences in the physical world. The operation of the human mind became a customary dogma, since there were no sufficient evidence to warrant those events. Moreso, Hume exposed his readers to the independent existence of object of perception and, the evidence that our sense faculties are incapable of giving rise to the notion of the existence of those objects after they no longer appear to the senses.<sup>22</sup> To that extent, He offered very impressive and considerable distinctions to convince his readers. He assented to the general thesis of the empiricist that all knowledge is derived from the sense. Therefore, concepts and ideas such as, propositions, pain and the likes were arrived at through nothing but impression. And so, heat, colours, taste and smells are vivid, forceful and clear impressions while a recollection of these impressions are ideas – which are less forceful and copies of the former. Again, he argues like Locke that simple ideas cannot be broken down into still more simple ideas, while complex ideas are composed of two or more simple ones.<sup>23</sup> The connection between ideas are based on the principles of resemblance, contiguity in time or place and cause or effect. Though the human mind is understood to be passive at the time of impression, it is however, active during reflection on perceptual contents. He thinks that the nature of the human mind is readily open to compound, augment, and transpose experience.<sup>24</sup>

Another distinction introduced is the strict dichotomy between relations of ideas and matters of fact. where the former is concerned with analytic propositions whose truth are not discovered in experience but by the operation of thought alone and, the latter whose truth are contingent and discovered in experience. This is validated by report proposition and negating the proposition leads to no contradiction. His adherence to empiricism has contributed largely in the discourse of philosophy of science. Therefore, with regard to the evidence of our senses with which philosophy would be extremely embarrassed is, an attempt to justify matters which are beyond the testimony of sense or memory, which are derived entirely from the relation of cause and effect; and the idea of the relation between them are two objects, which we have frequently conjoined, and this likewise applies in other instances, and so, nothing

<sup>21</sup>David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4.

<sup>22</sup>John Perry, Michael Bratman & Martin Fischer, *Introduction to Philosophy: Classical and Contemporary Readings 7th ed.*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 198.

<sup>23</sup>Jeremy Stangroom & James Garvey, *The Great Philosophers*, (London: Arcturus Publishing Limited, 2007), 69.

<sup>24</sup>Jacobson Anne Jaap. "David Hume on Human Understanding", In *British Philosophy and the Age of Enlightenment Vol. 5*, Edited by Stuart Brown. (New York: Routledge, 1996), 125.

leads us to this inference but custom or a certain instinct of our nature.<sup>25</sup> This embarrassment, considered a triumphant empiricist scepticism was what we inherited from Hume. To that extent, our beliefs, the truth of our existence and the reality of the physical world come to be established from systematic doubting and those that could occur remains unknowable.

From the foregoing, the attack on certitude and knowledge has left the entire project of epistemology open to question. Scepticism is a view that our basic assumptions, beliefs and notions cannot be rationally justified. Its consequence is that all systems of beliefs are arbitrary. And that means that there is no rational way of deciding between the merits of the conflicting claims of religion and science, science and pseudoscience, medicine and quackery, hedonism and asceticism, Nazism and democracy and so on. If nothing is justifiable by reason, then all systems have equal cognitive merit. Meanwhile, the majority of philosophers' regard scepticism as something to overcome rather than embrace. It has been taken to refer to many things. There is, however, a version of it which is the strongest and the most fundamental. This version is directed not against the possibility of knowledge or justified true belief, but against the process of reasoning which supposedly yields this product. It is, the reliability of reasoning that the sceptic is calling into question. The products of reasoning will be automatically suspect if the process is found to be dubious.<sup>26</sup> In all scepticism does not attack this or that type of belief, but the possibility of rationally justifying any belief. Furthermore, it is not a psychological attitude, but an epistemological theory. Sceptics may hold all those beliefs and perform all the actions which any normal human being holds or performs. The difference between the sceptics and others is that the sceptics denies while, others accept that the beliefs they hold can be rationally justified.

### **Concluding Remarks: The Attainment of Reliable Knowledge**

The preceding arguments have identified a number of premises and conclusions as we engage the pathway to reliable knowledge. True, the present work, it must be established, does not follow the arguments that knowledge is to be produced as we find it in positivists programmes in philosophy and in science. In its traditional sense, knowledge is to be attained and epistemologists are led to discover knowledge not to produce it. This is one of the reasons why man as a fallibilist will ever contend with a continuous search for knowledge with all his errors, ignorance and inadequacies. To this extent, we ought to have a retrospection on the

<sup>25</sup>John Cottingham, *Western Philosophy: An Anthology 2nd Ed.*, (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2008), 38.

<sup>26</sup>Kekes, "Recent Trends and Future Prospects in Epistemology," 96- 97.

Socratic and Platonic programmes in epistemology wherein, it is understood that *episteme* is not to be produced, rather to be attained. What may be produced could be *doxa* which means opinions, viewpoints, conjectures and speculations. For it is my belief that man does not have the capacity to produce a perfection characteristic of truth, certainty and exhausted justification that define knowledge in its eternity. Man is only able to produce information which is yet the most inferior form of knowledge.

This rather pessimistic view of our effort to arrive at knowledge is perhaps what the sceptic, since ancient times, had tried to put across. For the ancient thinkers such as, Gorgia, Protagoras and Thrasymachus who could be said to represent this orientation are read to present the impossibility of knowledge. Such is a rather unpleasant interpretation of the sceptic orientation. Rene Descartes, in the modern period presented yet another form of scepticism in attempt to discover knowledge that is true and eternally certain, for which reason he inaugurated what is known as systematic doubt. This is yet another sceptic milestone on the path to knowledge discovery. David Hume represented a rather thoroughgoing scepticism which was an onslaught to the positivist scientific programme or philosophy of science. This sort of scepticism left no room for any reliable form of knowledge.

The present paper however subscribe to a form of scepticism that may be useful as we walk the path to knowledge. This is the scepticism of George Santayana who argues that

Scepticism is an exercise, not a life; it is a discipline fit to purify the mind of prejudice and render it all the more apt, when the time comes, to believe and to act wisely; and meantime the pure sceptic need take no offence at the multiplicity of images that crowd upon him, if he is scrupulous not to trust them and to assert nothing at their prompting. Scepticism is the chastity of the intellect, and it is shameful to surrender it too soon or to the first comer: there is nobility in preserving it coolly and proudly through a long youth, until at last, in the ripeness of instinct and discretion, it can be safely exchanged for fidelity and happiness.<sup>27</sup>

Such an orientation presents a rigorous caution; holding back of radical judgment and characterized by epistemological tolerance. And so, one may conclude here with the thesis that the certitude of knowledge is attainable, but the caution towards judgment must be employed. This is not the epistemological pessimism of Karl Popper nor, the ever-enigmatic position of

<sup>27</sup>George Santayana *Scepticism and Animal Faith Introduction to a System of Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publication, 1955), 69-70

David Hume nor, the nihilism of the Sophists. Man must hold back judgment and surrender it to critical thinking so that in the ripeness of instinct and discretion we may attain fidelity and happiness for which knowledge is to be cultivated.

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