

SKEPTICISM: PRO OR CONS TO EPISTEMOLOGY

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Abstract

There has been a strong understanding that skepticism as a method in philosophy is not pro-knowledge. As a challenger of knowledge it is rather considered as against knowledge. In this sense it does not deserve a space within epistemology, which is after the knowledge. The primary aim of this paper is to find a link between scepticism and the epistemology considering the approaches of Descartes and Hume to this issue. While analyzing the point raised by me, the views of the scholars like Peirce, Kevin McCain, Cottingham, and John Greco have been taken into account. In the end it has been suggested that so far as the skeptic approaches of Descartes and Hume are concerned can be treated as knowledge-challenging, not knowledge-denying. So justifiably it can be said that scepticism is very much within the theoretical geography of epistemology.

Keywords

Skepticism, Epistemology, Certain knowledge, Impressions, Ideas, Foundationalism.

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Introduction

Epistemology is a part of philosophy that focuses on how we gain knowledge. It investigates ideas such as: How do we learn and understand things. Where our knowledge does come from? Can we trust our knowledge? Doubt makes it difficult for us to be sure about what we know and believe. This happens because what we know is often based on guesses and ideas that may not be correct or trustworthy. When we are not completely sure about what we know, their skepticism arises. This is how skepticism is a way of thinking that helps us to question and analyze information. It encourages us to think critically and understand why we should believe certain things about the world.

Skepticism is a way of thinking that questions: Are certain knowledge and beliefs really possible. The process starts with asking questions and raising doubts. It tries to show that humans have limits in how they see and think. By questioning and looking for inconsistencies, skepticism helps us to understand the complicated aspects of reality better. Different beliefs can cause different levels of doubt. Doubt can only apply to beliefs that are formed in certain ways. For example, questioning beliefs that are based on memory, logic, or any kind of reasoning at all, and questioning opinions can be limited to beliefs about specific things. These things can include questioning beliefs about the world around us, questioning beliefs about what others think, and questioning beliefs about what is important, and so on. Many people have discussed and disagreed about the meaning of knowledge in philosophy. It examines, what knowledge means, how we acquire it, and what makes our beliefs true or reasonable. Most often, people believe that knowledge is when you think something is true and you have a good reason to believe it. For something to be considered knowledge, there are three requirements: i) You must personally believe it, ii) It must actually be true, and iii) You must have a good reason for believing it (having justified true belief).¹

When we discuss knowledge, both doubters and believers agree on what it means. This definition means that if someone knows something, it is definitely true and they cannot be mistaken about it. Being skeptical means not being too sure about what you know, being willing to consider new ideas, and using evidence to make decisions. This way of thinking helps us to improve our understanding of philosophy. The goal is to investigate if having doubts about philosophy is a helpful way to understand things, and to demonstrate that being skeptical can be a good philosophical approach by considering the ideas of Rene Descartes and David Hume. Ironically, skepticism is a way of thinking, and people have wondered if it can avoid being criticized for its own ideas or thoughts.

Whether skepticism is seen as a positive or negative quality depends on how we understand skepticism. In the past, people have used this word to talk about many different ideas and things people do. The Pyrrhonian skeptics, who followed the ideas of ancient Greek philosopher Pyrrho of Elis, believed in a deep form of doubting everything. They thought it was best to not judge any beliefs or opinions and said that it is impossible to be completely certain about anything. Instead, they believed in constantly questioning and doubting everything, saying that one should not believe or accept any claims, including the idea of truth itself. The goal of Pyrrhonian skepticism was to help people feel calm by getting rid of the mental stress caused by strongly held beliefs. They wanted to have a calm and balanced state of mind by not taking sides on anything. They emphasized the importance of not making judgments to have a calm and fair way of thinking.²

But when we think about it, skepticism questions the notion that humans can have or acquire knowledge. During the Renaissance, people understood that knowledge was important, but they didn't really try to challenge the doubtfulness that was present in ancient times. So, the problem was not solved and it is still happening now. Then Descartes came forward and attempted to solve this problem. In simpler words, the idea is that we need to test a hypothesis. Skepticism can either be knowledge against something or knowledge in support of it. To solve the problem of doubt in Western thinking, Descartes and Hume attempted to combat skepticism by finding a way to both be sure and unsure at the same time. Both these thinkers have had successful discussions about philosophy because of the benefits of this approach.

Analysis of the views of Descartes and Hume

Descartes in his book, *Meditations of First Philosophy*, aimed to show that skepticism is incorrect. But before doing that, he made sure to clearly explain why people may doubt or question something in a very convincing way. Descartes' main idea is to use skepticism's own beliefs to prove it wrong. He started by not trusting that anything is true - including what you see or what people say, and even how you think and make choices. If something is true and can withstand lots of doubt, then it must be definitely true and a strong foundation for knowledge. He begins to search for indubitable knowledge by subjecting all his beliefs to a skeptical attack. He goes on the path of methodical doubt realizing that, "to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations".³ Descartes stated that even if we have doubts, there are certain things that we can be completely certain of, such as the fact that we are thinking and that we exist. He not only doubted all his opinions one by one but by attacking the sources of knowledge such as the senses, the reason, the

imagination etc. If one refuses to enter upon the quest for certainty or thinks that certainty cannot be attained, then one is thereby committed to rejecting Descartes's method of doubt as the primary technique of epistemological analysis.

The American Philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce(1839-1914) was one of the pioneer scholars to develop this type of criticism against Descartes. He writes, "We cannot begin with complete doubt. But we must begin with all prejudices which we actually have when we enter upon the study of philosophy. These prejudices are not to be dispelled by a maxim, for they are things which do not occur to us can be questioned".⁴ According to Peirce, Descartes did not have a good reason for his doubts in *Meditation I*; rather his doubts were shams, paper doubts. Hence, Peirce charges, that the *Meditations* are a waste of effort and not a genuine inquiry.

This paper talks about how he questions what most people believe, searches for basic truths, and how his ideas have greatly influenced knowledge and modern philosophy for a long time. Descartes wanted to find a new way of comprehending things by doubting everything. He thinks that if we question everything and are absolutely certain about what we already know, we can understand the world better. To achieve what he wants, he uses a method called methodological skepticism. This means he doubts and investigates any idea that can be doubted, to be certain and have a strong foundation of true knowledge. In the beginning, Descartes only understands that thinking is something that exists. I need my thoughts to exist, which means I do exist. So, Descartes thinks that he is absolutely certain that he exists. Descartes thinks that the only thing he knows for sure is that he exists as someone who can think. His main focus is on thinking, and that is the only part of him that cannot be doubted.

Descartes explains that "thought" is when something occurs in your mind and you immediately realize it. Thinking is the act of using our brain to process information and be conscious of it. Descartes used doubt to find trustworthy knowledge. He sought to establish a solid foundation for knowledge by questioning his senses and previous beliefs. Descartes is well-known for saying, "I think, so I exist." He believed this idea was beyond doubt and used it as a starting point. He used to question everything, even things that most people believe to be true. Descartes wanted to find ideas that could not be questioned, even if there was a chance of being fooled by a bad demon.

This summary can be that how Descartes doubted everything and tried to find absolutely certain knowledge. By his method, he has arrived at the indubitable truth with valid reason and he proposes three skeptical arguments in his philosophy to which doubt is applied.

- Arguments from Sense Perception
- Arguments from Dreams
- Evil Demon Argument

Descartes uses the Wax Argument to explain that our senses have limitations by demonstrating how our perception of an object changes when it transforms. He examines a piece of wax and notices how it looks, feels, how big it is, what color it is, how it smells, and other things about it. When he puts the wax near the fire, it changes completely. However, it seems like it is still the same thing: it is still a piece of wax, even though what our senses perceive tells us that its characteristics have changed. So, to understand the wax properly, he cannot trust his senses.⁵ He should think instead. However, Descartes said that it can't be that all of his beliefs are false. This is because if someone holds incorrect beliefs, it shows that they are using their reasoning abilities. If someone is thinking, it means they are alive. So, he thinks that he is real and he is sure about it because he is thinking. This way of thinking means if I can think, then I know for sure that I exist. Descartes wanted to gain more knowledge by showing himself that God is real, that we can know things by having a clear understanding of them, that it is easier to understand the mind than the body that most of what makes up matter is its size, and that most of his previous beliefs are correct. After all, Descartes found out that the most important thing about himself is that he exists because of his thoughts. This idea is well known from a book called *The Discourse on Method*. It says that if I am thinking, then I know I exist. He wants to find a truth that is true and can't be questioned. I am sure that I exist because I am thinking and doubting everything else. Even if everything I believe is wrong, I know one thing for sure: whenever I am aware of my thoughts or any mental activity like doubting or deciding, I know that I exist as a thinking being. Descartes came up with a principle that he was very certain of, which he expressed in Latin as "*cogito ergo sum*", which means that he exists because he thinks. Hence, '*cogito ergo sum*' is the first most certain proposition that stands indubitable, before every thinker "who philosophizes orderly".⁶ After showing that "I think, therefore I am" is true, he builds a big structure of how we know things and then what things actually exist (from epistemology to ontology). Descartes has also been charged with attempting to prove God's existence by appealing to clear and distinct perceptions; whereas he tried to validate clear and distinct perceptions by appealing to God's veracity. In other words, from the criterion of clearness and distinctness of ideas, he proves the existence of a veracious God and; again, from the veracity of God he proves the ultimate truth of the criterion of clearness and distinctness.

David Hume, came up with a new reason to doubt things. Hume thought that every real idea comes from things we have seen or experienced, or from our own thoughts and reflections. Hume believed that there is no solid evidence or personal experiences that can give us good reasons to believe in things like God, a forever-lasting self, a soul, a world outside our minds, events that always happen for a reason, an objective right or wrong separate from people's opinions, or reasoning based on patterns we observe. Basically, Hume thought that if we only looked at philosophy, we would not be sure about anything. But he believed that nature's power stops this uncertainty. Hume thought that our beliefs are not really based on logic or reasoning, but more on what we tend to do or how we usually behave. Naturally, we tend to believe in our memories and thinking. Even if there are good reasons to doubt them, our beliefs do not easily change. Hume liked to doubt things carefully and cautiously, which he called "mitigated" skepticism. He did not agree with a strong form of doubt called Pyrrhonian doubt because he thought it was unrealistic and impossible for the mind. In simple terms, skepticism doubts whether anything can be known for certain. Most people agree that it is hard to prove or justify claims of knowledge. There are two types of doubt about knowledge: Excessive skepticism and Mitigated skepticism.

Pyrrho believed in being very doubtful about everything (excessive skepticism). He thought it was best to not make any judgments because there are good and bad reasons for thinking either way. He suggests ways to find peace within yourself. However, Hume's doubt is not the same as this. He does not suggest holding back from making judgments. Instead, he suggests that judgments should be based on evidence from our senses and rational thinking (mitigated skepticism). Hume's way of thinking questioned traditional beliefs about the ways things are related, how we gain knowledge from our experiences, and what factors shape our identities. He said that our knowledge comes from our senses, so our beliefs can only be sure if we see or experience them. Moreover, he also explored the concept that a person's self is not one fixed thing, but instead a mixture of thoughts and experiences that constantly change. Hume's ideas began conversations about how much people can truly comprehend and what counts as real knowledge.

He greatly influenced the study of skepticism and how we understand things. His ideas continue to make contemporary philosophers think deeply and be motivated to question the foundation of our knowledge and beliefs.

- John Greco, the scholar in his article, talks about how Thomas Reid makes really strong points against Hume's doubt, especially when it comes to whether or not there is a world outside of our minds.⁷

Reid disagreed with Hume's idea that what we know comes only from our senses. Reid said that our understanding of the world outside ourselves is based on the natural abilities we are born with and what makes sense to us. Reid argued that Hume's doubt didn't explain our natural beliefs about what's real outside of ourselves, and that these beliefs are very important in how we understand the world. Greco thinks that Reid's smart comments on Hume's doubt are really important and add a lot to the discussions about how we know things and what knowledge is. Hume mainly responded to Reid's critique by highlighting that our understanding comes from observing and experiencing things. Hume argued that we can only know about the external world through our senses, and we can't be sure about any necessary connections or things beneath our experiences. He believed that our knowledge is limited in this way. Hume agreed that common sense beliefs exist, but he argued that they are not enough to make definite claims about the outside world. Even though Reid disagreed, Hume continued to believe strongly in his philosophical skepticism. He believed that our knowledge comes from what we are used to and what we do regularly, rather than from any natural connection between our thoughts and the world around us. According to Reid, our perception of the external world is not based solely on individual sensations or ideas but is shaped by our innate faculties of perception and common sense. He argued that we possess certain natural and instinctive beliefs that guide our understanding of the world, such as the belief in the existence of a physical reality beyond our subjective experiences. Reid emphasized that these fundamental beliefs are not subject to philosophical skepticism or doubt and form the basis for our everyday experiences. In essence, Reid's argument challenged Hume's skepticism by highlighting the role of innate human faculties and common sense in grounding our knowledge of the external world.

David Hume, renowned for his philosophical skepticism, encountered a formidable challenge to his ideas in the form of Thomas Reid's argument. Hume's skepticism had called into question the certainty of our knowledge, particularly regarding the external world. However, Reid's response posed a significant challenge to Hume's position. Hume acknowledged Reid's argument but remained unconvinced. He maintained that our beliefs about the external world are ultimately based on impressions and ideas derived from our senses. According to Hume, Reid's appeal to innate faculties and common sense did not provide a satisfactory solution to the problem of justifying our knowledge of the external world. Hume believed that our beliefs are rooted in custom and habit rather than any inherent connection between our ideas and the external reality they supposedly represent. Thus, Hume remained

steadfast in his skepticism, maintaining that we cannot have certain knowledge about the external world beyond our subjective experiences.⁸

- The scholar Richard H. Popkin in his article, explores the important criticisms brought up by Joseph Priestley against David Hume's philosophy.⁹

He disagreed with some of Hume's ideas, especially the ones about cause and doubt. Priestley said that Hume was wrong to say that events are not connected to each other and to doubt causality. But Hume had explained his ideas about how things happen and why they happen. He said that our beliefs about why one thing causes another are actually based on what we are used to and what we have seen happen before, rather than on any definite link between events. He also explained his thoughts on skepticism, saying that although he acknowledged the limits of human understanding, he did not support completely dismissing knowledge gained through observation and experience.

Instead, Hume believed in a less extreme kind of doubt that accepted that human knowledge can be wrong. However, he also believed that we can still learn meaningful and helpful things about the natural world. Despite people criticizing him, Hume's response stayed the same as his general philosophical viewpoint. David Hume gave much thought to doubt in philosophy and made advancements in understanding how we can be certain about our knowledge. Hume's way of thinking was based on the idea that our understanding of the world comes from what we see, hear, and feel. He said that even though people may not always understand things completely and might have questions, if we examine how our minds work, we can find the basic rules that control our thoughts.

Hume had a famous idea that helped him to understand things better. He said there is a big difference between real experiences and thoughts. Impressions are intense and immediate sensory experiences, such as what you see, hear, smell, or feel. However, ideas are thoughts that come from these impressions using processes such as remembering or imagining. Hume studied where our thoughts come from and how they are connected to each other. He wanted to show that people's thoughts are based on repeated patterns that we can observe. This way of doing things made it easier for him to know when he was unsure about something and when he was completely sure about it. It helped him figure out what we can learn by using proof and how our brains function predictably. This paper explains, the most important ideas are the ones that explain how something leads to or affects another thing. For instance, we understand that fire creates warmth and when a moving pool ball hits a still ball, it also makes the still ball move. But how can we know for certain if one

thing leads to another. How can we understand this based on our own personal experiences? Cause and effect is when something occurs and it results in another occurrence. It is how one thing leads to another. In simpler terms, this text discusses Hume's uncertainties and objections to the ideas of cause and effect, as well as the process of making generalizations from specific instances. He, believes that we learn by using our senses like seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling. We also learn by noticing patterns in these experiences.¹⁰

Some people believe that our future will be like our past. This is because in the past, what we have experienced before is similar to our experiences in the present and future. But that argument assumes what it is trying to prove. Hume answered to how we understand the idea of necessary connection, but it was a doubtful answer. He believes that it comes from the brain deciding when it feels the familiar first part of something. When you see a moving ball hit a ball that is still, your brain thinks that the still ball will also start moving. The concept of necessary connection comes from the feeling of being guided or pulled along in this process.

Hume's solution is not very convincing because although it explains where we get the idea of a necessary connection, it doesn't make our thoughts about cause and effect any more reasonable. This solution is about why we feel the need to believe in what will happen in the future and what happened in the past. However, it does not prove that these beliefs are reasonable. It's still true that the only evidence we have for these beliefs is what we have personally witnessed in the past, when events occurred in a sequential and related manner. So, any opinions based on personal experiences are really just habits and not logical thoughts. This means that what we are used to doing or choosing in life has a bigger impact on our actions than thinking logically.

Thus, Descartes and Hume were two very important philosophers who lived in different times. They had different views on doubting and questioning what we know. Descartes started a radical journey of questioning to find an unquestionable truth. His journey led him to the idea that since he can think, he must exist. He wanted to create a solid foundation for knowledge, which would lead to rational thinking. This foundation involved having clear and distinct ideas as a way to be certain about something. On the other hand, Hume, who believed in learning through experience, doubted if we can be certain about anything. He highlighted that our ability to understand things is limited. He criticized the ideas of cause and effect, reasoning from evidence, and the concept of the self, questioning what we commonly believe to be true and showing that our knowledge from experience can sometimes be wrong. Hume's ideas played a big role in the development of the belief that

knowledge comes from our experiences and questioning everything. He made people think about what we can really know about the world and how much we can know. While Descartes wanted to be completely certain and have a solid foundation of knowledge, Hume believed that our understanding is limited. He suggested that we should rely more on probabilities and evidence from our experiences. Both philosophers have made significant and lasting contributions that are still influencing current discussions in the areas of epistemology and the philosophy of knowledge.

This study examines two different opinions and helps us to understand the ongoing argument between rationalism and empiricism in philosophy better. It also demonstrates how these arguments have affected modern philosophy throughout history. By being skeptical, we can reach a clear and definite understanding, which is the goal of philosophy. It is very important to find certain truths in the field of knowledge. Modern philosophers are still learning and developing the ideas of doubting things in the field of knowledge. These thinkers are using various ideas from different philosophies to understand how to handle doubt in today's world. Some individuals use ideas like reliabilism or contextualism to understand their level of knowledge and determine the trustworthiness of their beliefs. Some individuals examine how our language influences the way we think and our perception of truth.

They are interested in knowing how language affects the way we see the world and our thoughts about what we understand. Furthermore, recent findings in the study of cognitive science and understanding how our minds function have resulted in collaborations to explore the mental habits and shortcuts that could shed light on why we tend to have uncertain and questioning attitudes. In a world where people are more connected, modern thinkers are also studying how global knowledge and technology affect our understanding of things. These ongoing searches indicate that questioning things remains extremely important in modern philosophy. It assists us to have important discussions about what we can and cannot understand. Thus, after the study of the views of Rene Descartes and David Hume on Scepticism, finally we come to the notion that skepticism is a successful method in philosophy. In this way it can justifiably said that scepticism (at least mitigated scepticism) is not against knowledge but pro-knowledge. And it has a space within the circumference of the epistemology.

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