

Scepticism and Positivism

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1 Introduction

Scruton talks about scepticism in chapter two of his book “Modern Philosophy - an introduction and survey” [Scr97], and follows in the next chapter with material about a number of other “-isms” many of which are connected with scepticism (concessions or responses to it), thus giving an idea of the influence of sceptical arguments beyond the ranks of radical sceptics.

2 Levels of Scepticism

There are many kinds and degrees of scepticism. For today’s purposes the following classification may be helpful:

- Common-sense Scepticism

This is what we use when we ignore a transparent scam in our mailbox, or when we doubt the word of a politician.

- Hard-core Scepticism

This is the scepticism of Plato’s Academy (after Plato) and of the followers of Pyrrho of Elis. It says that NO knowledge is possible (Academic Scepticism) or that even to hold an opinion counts as dogmatism and that we should strive to suspend judgement on all matters. This is the kind of thing that present day academics usually mean when they talk of “scepticism” (or “skepticism”).

- Selective Scepticisms

Sometimes philosophers are sceptical about a whole class of propositions, but not about all knowledge or belief. Often we have special names for these kinds of scepticism, e.g. Nominalism (scepticism about universals or abstract entities), Idealism (scepticism about anything but ideas)

- Graduated Scepticisms

Hard-core and selective scepticisms are rather black and white, large classifications of claims are either admitted or unequivocally rejected (as possible knowledge or reasonable beliefs). Graduated scepticisms are more subtle, they may allow an intermediate status for some claim, or more subtle criteria separating acceptable from unacceptable claims in some particular area. Positivism may be thought of in this way. Broad swathes of philosophy are condemned by positivism but not all of it, science is the model of propositions which are OK, but only science done properly, which is called *positive* science.

In addition to these levels of scepticism, it may be noted that much academic interest in scepticism might best be described as *analytic* scepticism. which on its face is not sceptical at all, but is just the study of scepticism and the analysis of the strength of the various sceptical stances and the grounds for adopting or rejecting them. However, in a way, this is in itself a form of scepticism, leaning towards pyrrhonism, since this kind of study of scepticism may be entirely non-committal, the academics involved may in the end neither endorse nor reject any particular kind of scepticism, they just *analyse* but suspend judgement.

3 The Discussion

I propose that we break the discussion into two parts:

1. Common-sense scepticism
2. Other scepticisms

Not much introduction is needed for the first part, just a few questions to consider. I propose to introduce the second part with a very brief history of scepticism and positivism.

4 Common-sense Scepticism

In living our lives it's not a good idea to believe everything we are told. Often information comes from sources which have an interest in our believing some proposition whether or not

it is actually true, because of some likely influence that belief may have on our actions, for example the purchase of some product, or the way we vote in an election.

Apart from this kind of common-sense scepticism, it may be noted that an element of scepticism is built into our legal system, which recognises that prosecuting authorities should not be trusted but should rather be required to persuade a jury of the truth of their accusations, “beyond reasonable doubt”.

In our lifetimes there has been considerable change in the attitude of ordinary people to what they are told by figures of “authority” who are purported to be reliable sources of information or advice.

Here are some questions to consider:

- Would you rather be considered “sceptical” or “gullible”?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of being sceptical (on the one hand) or gullible (on the other)?
- Do you believe everything you are told, or are you sometimes sceptical about what people say?
- How do you decide what to believe, what to disbelieve, or when to suspend judgement?
- Do you believe claims coming from:
 - Teachers/academics
 - Doctors
 - Police/courts
 - Politicians
 - Scientists
 - Pressure groups
 - Consumer organisations (e.g. which)
 - Books
 - Papers
 - The Web
 - Social Media
 - Philosophers
 - Commercial advertisements
 - Cold callers

add your own...

- Where the answer is “sometimes” how do you tell what to believe?
- Has your trust in these “authorities” grown or declined over the years?

5 Some Notes on the History of Scepticism

Stages:

1. Precursors

- Pre-socratics
 - The contrast between the success of reason in mathematics and in “philosophy”:
 - * mathematics reliable, enduring, cumulative
 - * philosophy ephemeral, dubitable, contradictory
 - Illustrated by the seminal contradiction between:
 - * Heraclitus (c 535-475 bc) - everything is in constant flux
 - * Parmenides (c 500-450 bc) - nothing changes
- Socrates and the Sophists, oppose moderately sceptical relativism by conceptual analysis
- Plato and Aristotle - the great classical system builders
 - Plato reconciles Heraclitus and Parmenides using his two worlds:
 - * the perfect and eternal world of ideals, of which we have reliable and durable knowledge through reason
 - * the elusive and shifting world of appearances of which we form opinions through our senses but of which we can have no true knowledge
 - Aristotle begins the study of logic and puts forward his conception of “demonstrative science”

2. Academic and Pyrrhonian Scepticism (hard core scepticism)

After Plato and Aristotle Greek philosophy becomes predominantly “practical” rather than theoretical, i.e. concerned primarily with ethics, politics, how to live a life. Strangely enough this includes the two major schools of radical scepticism which span a period of 300+ years between 300 bc and 200 ad. These two are the Academic Sceptics (in Plato’s academy), and the Pyrrhonian, originating with Pyrrho of Elis. The “practical” motivation in Pyrrhonian philosophy is the search for tranquility which is held to result from the suspension of judgement, in turn a consequence of arguments which establish “equipollence” of the two alternatives for each proposition that it is true or false.

3. Later Influence

- Saint Augustine (354-430)
Argued against academic scepticism

- Savonarola (1452-1498), Luther

The work of Sextus Empiricus was “rediscovered” in the 15th century and the problem of justifying a criterion for true and certain religious knowledge featured in Savonarola’s dispute with the authority of the pop in 1497/8 (culminating in his execution) and in Luther’s break with Rome.

Savonarola’s crusade involved abolishing philosophy through skepticism so that people could turn to revelation instead.

- Moderated and constructive scepticisms
- Rationalist and empiricist philosophy
Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz.
Locke, Berkeley and Hume.

4. Positivism [[Kol66](#)]

- Hume
- Carnap and Popper
- The rout of positivism

6 Further Reading

There are several online articles on various aspects of scepticism at the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy.

References

- [Emp33] Sextus Empiricus. *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. Harvard University Press, 1933.
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- [Scr97] Roger Scruton. *Modern Philosophy - an introduction and survey*. Arrow Non-Fiction, 1997.