



The Skeptics SA guide to Scepticism

What is scepticism and why be sceptical?

The suggestion was put to the sceptics at a recent psychic fair that we must have suffered some terrible experience when children to become so distrusting and to have abandoned belief.

This is not so. scepticism is the very positive and powerful method by which we determine the limits of reality and our conceptions of what we understand.

“I respect faith, but it is doubt that gets you an education” Wilson Miznar

The same idea was expressed by 12th Century theologian Peter Abelard: “I must understand in order that I may believe. By doubting, we come to questioning, and by questioning we perceive the truth.”

This the role of scepticism: it is not a rejection of, but a means of uncovering the truth. And this is the reason why it is viewed with some disfavor by those who want you to accept their brand of Truth, without questioning it. But is there more than that to it? How did scepticism gain its slightly ambivalent aura?

The original idea, like many of our ideas, arose with the ancient Greeks, who had a word for it—skeptikos—meaning look about, consider, observe, examine, question.

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Nothing wrong with that, or with the writing of one of the earliest men who could be considered a sceptic: Xenophanes (c 530 BCE), who suggested: ‘As for the certain truth, no man has known it Nor will he know it All is but a web of guesses.’

However, the Greeks not only invented ideas, they also invented philosophy. And unfortunately, because of philosophy, they then took the view that observations, ideas, and beliefs should be examined, and combined it with idea that we can never be sure of knowing absolute truth. From this they deduced from the idea that nothing can be known for certain to the idea that nothing can be known at all. From our viewpoint this shows that, while the Greeks invented the logical argument, they really weren’t that good at it.

Most of the blame for scepticism is generally placed on Pyrrho of Elis (c 365 – 275 BCE), who carried the argument to its logical conclusion that nothing can be known, not even the fact that nothing can be known. This is of course a logical impossibility — a paradox — something else the Greeks delighted in inventing. Today we recognise that if your argument ends in a paradox, it’s a very good indication that your starting position was a

bit wobbly, and should be rethought. But the Greeks hadn’t worked this out and thought that achievement of a paradoxical conclusion meant you had established an eternal truth.

Pyrrho then went from the idea that nothing could be proved to the position that there should be no attempt to prove anything. He then taught that you should never judge anything, because you can never prove it good or bad. Secondly, you should never express an opinion. and thirdly, you shouldn’t care about anything. This attitude of non-questioning acceptance is a long way from the original meaning of skeptikos. But then Pyrrho was not really a sceptic, either in the original sense of one prepared to consider everything, or in the modern pejorative sense of one who doubts everything.

Philosophical scepticism fitted in well with the Greek culture of ideas. It was based on logical reasoning (such as it was), and it was of no practical use, which the Greeks regarded as a virtue.

One result of Alexander of Macedon’s conquests of the Middle East was the eventual import of a considerable amount of superstition into Greek civilisation. Up to this time, the Greeks’ superstition, like their religion, was

something they could take or leave alone, and the wise opinion was that it was best left alone. The Greek sceptics, faced with dogmatism and new superstitions such as astrology, attempted to argue against them. However they had already crippled themselves, since according to their principles, they had to argue against all opinion, good and bad. Furthermore, in arguing, they had to present all possible arguments, good and bad, because their version of scepticism would not allow them to judge their own arguments. Sextus Empiricus (160 – 210 CE) considered that there were no grounds for evaluating anything, even his own arguments, and so there were no grounds for rejecting any of them. So his work was summary of every possible argument good, bad, and ridiculous: in no particular order, because of course, you couldn't judge whether they were reasonable or not. The result was inevitable: superstition and dogmatism won and scepticism got the reputation of a viewpoint of total and irrational disbelief in everything. From this any expression of doubt became viewed as sinful, and belief in faith and authority was considered the desired norm.

Francis Bacon in about 1620 wrote *The New Method*, wherein he expounded the view that human knowledge could be obtained by observation. However he saw the problem that the human mind was prone to find an order and regularity in the world. Once it conceived of an order, whether that conception was correct or not, the mind would be open only to that evidence which agreed with the conception. He therefore presented that case that there should

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be conscious search and evaluation of all evidence for or against a belief about the world, not just accepting the first impression. This questioning of the evidence of observation is perhaps the most significant development in the quest for knowledge ever.

Unlike the older philosophical scepticism, this scientific scepticism was of tremendous use, both in the actual attainment of knowledge, and in the cultural concept that there was a more reliable method of gathering information about the world that relying on the authority of the ancients of the Golden Age. Knowledge could be not merely maintained, but increased. This rejection of the word of authority, and the concept that the world was understandable through investigation, was reflected in the motto of the Royal Society (established 1662): 'Trust no-one: the truth is out there' (somewhat loosely translated). To a large extent this sceptical outlook dominated society for the next 300 years.

The general view of cultural modernism, which grew from the Enlightenment and the establishment of science, has to a large extent worked in producing a pretty good society. Not least was that the end of dogmatism also meant the end of witch-hunts. As the French sceptic Montaigne pointed out: "It is rating our conjectures pretty highly to roast people for them".

Yet cultural modernism has its problems, the main one being the necessity of examining and evaluating everything, even our own viewpoints. It was so much easier in the old days

when we didn't have to think about everything and could accept the dogmatism of authority. Wouldn't life be easier with the certainty of dogma? Yes it would be, but post-modernism has discovered we no longer need even to accept the authority of others. Everything we personally believe is as true as anything anyone else believes.

Recent years have seen religious groups hunting the demon-possessed, people forced to confess that they were worshipping Satan, medical researchers faking results because they believe they know the truth: whatever the evidence says, social workers using ouija boards, and people believing in astrology or visits by little men from outer space.

Without critical examination of these claims and practices, and with nearly everybody demanding tolerance for whatever conjecture their minds can conceive, we are faced with a flood of superstitious dogma. Like the Greeks, the only counter we have to this evil is scepticism.

We can only hope that scientific scepticism will be more effective than philosophical scepticism was.

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