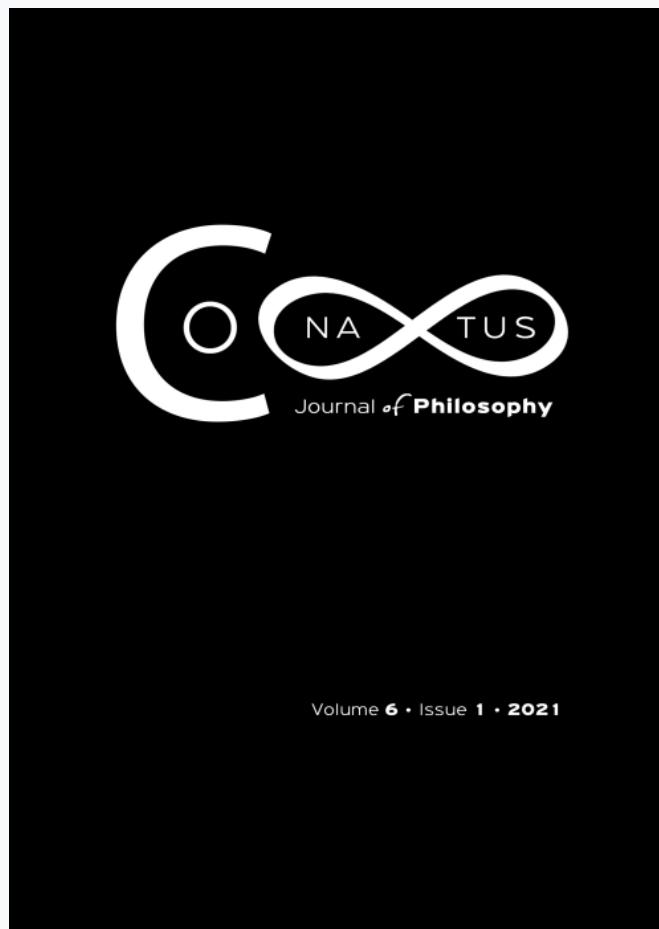


## Conatus - Journal of Philosophy

Vol 6, No 1 (2021)

Conatus - Journal of Philosophy



### Should Skepticism Be Discredited?

Anthony Udoka Ezebuiro, Obiora Anichebe, Anthony Chimankpam Ojimba

doi: [10.12681/cjp.24589](https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.24589)

Copyright © 2021, Anthony Udoka Ezebuiro, Obiora Anichebe, Anthony Chimankpam Ojimba



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

### To cite this article:

Ezebuiro, A. U., Anichebe, O., & Ojimba, A. C. (2021). Should Skepticism Be Discredited?. *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 6(1), 61–81. <https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.24589>

# Should Skepticism Be Discredited?

**Anthony Udoka Ezebuiro**

*University of Nigeria, Nigeria*

E-mail address: [anthony.ezebuiro@unn.edu.ng](mailto:anthony.ezebuiro@unn.edu.ng)

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8231-5270>

**Obiora Anichebe**

*University of Nigeria, Nigeria*

E-mail address: [obiora.anichebe@unn.edu.ng](mailto:obiora.anichebe@unn.edu.ng)

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4208-9360>

**Anthony Chimankpam Ojimba**

*University of Nigeria, Nigeria*

E-mail address: [anthony.ojimba@unn.edu.ng](mailto:anthony.ojimba@unn.edu.ng)

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8188-8392>

## Abstract

*In our day-to-day life and experiences, when one doubts or questions unusually, he is branded a skeptic and consequently resisted. Skeptics, over the years, are seen as people whose basic mood is that of doubt; those who deny absolutely that true knowledge is possible. Although this is not completely true of skepticism, the present work demonstrates, though arguably, that skepticism is more of a philosophical method of inquiry; an epistemological attitude towards knowledge but whose goal is indeed certainty, although it selects a serious doubt concerning all knowledge as the starting point of the inquiry into the possibility of true knowledge. It can rightly be said that the work displays the paradox of skepticism. The word 'paradox' originates from a Latin term *paradoxum*, which has a Greek association *paradoxon*, or *paradoxos*, signifying "conflicting with expectation." Thus, the word *paradox* signifies a tenet or proposition contrary to received opinions. It is a statement or sentiment that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet, perhaps true in fact. The need for this work is necessitated by the fact that in the present age, it has become no longer the case that the best way to certainty is only by accepting entirely all that one is told, especially when such comes from a sage or a tradition. Obviously, we live in a dispensation where almost every human situation challenges the human rational faculty hence the tendency to change facts and hang-on to lies generates serious fever in every thinking mind. The result of this work therefore is that imperatively, the work demands that whoever wants knowledge should proceed through doubt. The method through which this work arrives at this conclusion is the analytic process of discussion and presentation.*

**Keywords:** *ataraxia; doubt; Nihilism; paradox; Skepticism; suspension*

## I. Introduction

We live in a dispensation where almost every human situation challenges the human rational faculty. It is a world where the tendency to change facts and hang-on to lies generates serious fever in every thinking mind. Whether in religion, politics or socio-economic and cultural life, truth-telling has gradually become a thing of the past in the world that we live in. It has become a costly price for one to take a facelift what one's neighbor narrates, because what is solemnly handed down as truth may, after investigation, be an all-round package of distorted facts. It no longer sounds funny that the society in which we live has developed the habit of telling lies at all circumstances such that confidence is fading out in human interactions. Consequently, there comes the need to develop the skeptic's mind-set and attitude if we must live and interact happily with one another in the same society. Sextus Empiricus was aware of this situation years ago that he did not fail to sound the beauty and value of skepticism. Commenting on his view about skepticism, Samuel Stumpf has this to say:

Skepticism originated in the hope of attaining mental peace or calmness. People have been disturbed by the contradiction of things and plagued by doubt as to which alternative they should believe. They were struck, however, by the different conceptions of truth different philosophers had proposed. They also noticed that people have discovered the truth (and these, the skeptics called dogmatists), those who confess they have not found it and also assert that it cannot be found (and this they also considered as dogmatic position), and finally those who persevere in the search for it. Unlike the first two, says Sextus, 'the Skeptics keep on searching.'<sup>1</sup>

Based on these, skeptics thought that if they could, by investigation, determine truth from falsehood, they could then attain tranquility of mind. Skepticism, therefore, is not a denial of the possibility of finding truth, nor is it a denial of the basic facts of human experience. Rather, it is a continuous process of inquiry in which every explanation of experience is tested by a counter experience. The fundamental principle of skepticism, according to Sextus, is that to every proposition an equal proposition is opposed. It is a consequence of this principle, he says, that "we end

---

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Stumpf, *Philosophy: History & Problems* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), 120.

by ceasing to dogmatize.”<sup>2</sup> And this perhaps amounts to justification of belief according to Robert Audi.<sup>3</sup>

There is no gain-saying that skepticism is necessary if we must be freed from every form of dogmatism. To this extent, we must seek to deepen the skeptic’s mind-set and attitude if we must conquer this ugly situation and get ourselves out of the mess it provides. Since the target of skepticism is to challenge the alleged grounds of accepted assumptions, in order to know whether the claims they make are indubitable or necessarily true, it follows then to say that skepticism is a method of inquiry; hence a skeptic is someone who is unsatisfied with what is given and still is looking for truth.

It is unfortunate to observe that many today have capitalized on the fact that skeptics deny what appears acceptable to others to say that skeptics are those whose basic mood is that of doubt. And following that, they call skeptics *doubting Thomases*. Also coupled with the concern that skeptics doubt and question ‘extraordinarily’ people say they must be resisted. But the truth remains that skeptics were far from denying everything including the evident of sense perception. Like Sextus would say, those who say skeptics deny appearances “seem to me to be unacquainted with the statements of our school.”<sup>4</sup> This means that the skeptics did not question appearances but only the account given of appearances.

Since we believe that skepticism is a philosophical enterprise that meant something rather different, namely, seekers or inquirers of certain knowledge, in this paper, our attempt would be to demonstrate how this is possible. To be sure, the ancient skeptics were doubters, but they doubted in order that they may know. For instance, they doubted that Plato and Aristotle had succeeded in discovering the truth about the world, and they had these same doubts about the Epicureans and Stoics. But for all their doubt, they were, nevertheless, seekers after a method for achieving a tranquil life.<sup>5</sup>

It is based on this explanation therefore that skepticism, in our context, would demand that whoever wants true knowledge should proceed through doubt. Ordinarily, one would have thought that the best way to certainty is by accepting entirely all that one is told especially when it comes from a sage, or a tradition. But as a philosophical method of inquiry and epistemological attitude towards knowledge, skepticism has its goal as certainty, though it selects a serious universal doubt concerning all knowledge as the starting

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 120-121.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Audi, *Belief, Justification and Knowledge: An Introduction to Epistemology* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1988), 13.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 121-122.

<sup>5</sup> Ben Okwu Eboh, *Basic Issues in the Theory of Knowledge* (Nsukka: Fulladu Publishing Company, 1995), 16.

point of a theory of knowledge. History of philosophy is replete with the assumption that knowledge was possible and could be found. But skepticism questions such possibility and hence offers a methodology on how to behave without the criterion of truth.

## II. Various Notions of Skepticism and Applications in History

Originally, in the history of philosophy, the word *skepticism* is understood as a Greek word, which is derived from the verb *skeptestai* and which means “to inquire,” or “to investigate.” It is also from the Greek noun *skeptikos*, which is equally concerned with investigation. However, in the history of philosophy, peoples’ attitudes to skepticism depend more or less on their interpretation, understanding and applications of these basic words; hence there are variegated notions of skepticism and application in the history of philosophy.

What seems to be the first misconception of skepticism derived from misconstruing of the root meaning of the term ‘skepticism’ and these have led to some dangerous over-generalization where the skeptics are said to be denying almost everything. Obviously, the old Greek word, *skeptikoi* from which skeptics is derived, means something rather different namely, “seekers” or “inquirers” (of knowledge).<sup>6</sup>

A philosopher like Bittle would interpret the root word of skepticism to mean that “the mind cannot overcome doubt; that the human reason is not only perverted and diseased but is in itself fallacious, weak and unstable.”<sup>7</sup> This for him means that the mind is incapable of attaining knowledge, i.e. real certitude in knowledge is impossible. Ben Okwu Eboh also thinks that

What the sceptic is saying, in effect, is that the mind is incapable of attaining knowledge, that is, that real certitude in knowledge is impossible. In short, the sceptic holds that claims to knowledge are shaky because any supposed truth that is offered as a candidate for knowledge might conceivably be false. This is why, in the view of skeptics, the only logical and rational thing we have to do is to suspend our judgement always because of a real doubt as to the truth of our judgement.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Stumpf, 120.

<sup>7</sup> Celestine Nicholas Bittle, *Reality and the Mind* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1936), 26.

<sup>8</sup> Eboh, 16-17.

There is no gain saying that the above misconception is one of those ones which tend to ignore the vivid explanations of skepticism that the earliest skeptics themselves offered such as Pyrrho. Pyrrho was popular for his doctrine of *ataraxia*. *Ataraxia* is a Greek word which is literally translated as “imperturbability,” “equanimity,” or “tranquility.” Although the word *ataraxia* originally meant “freedom from worry and anxiety,” i.e., “a state of calmness of mind in the face of seemingly intractable disagreement,” later application of the term by Epicurus and his group, and the Stoics made it acquired varied senses in accordance with one’s philosophical theories. That is to say that the mental disturbance that prevented one from achieving *ataraxia* varied among the philosophers; hence each philosophy had a different understanding as to how to achieve *ataraxia*.<sup>9</sup>

The Pyrrhonian skeptics tried to avoid committing themselves on any and all questions, even as to whether their arguments were sound. However, for them, those who claim for themselves to judge the truth are bound to possess a criterion of truth. This criterion, then, either is without a judge’s approval or has been approved. But if it is without approval, whence comes it that it is trustworthy? For no matter of dispute is to be trusted without judging. And, if it has been approved, that which approves it, in turn, either has been approved or has not been approved, and so on *ad infinitum*.<sup>10</sup> Skepticism for them therefore, was ability, or mental attitude, for opposing evidence both pro and con on any question about what was nonevident, so that one would suspend judgement on the question.<sup>11</sup> It was this state of mind that necessitated the state of *ataraxia*; a state of quietude, or unperturbedness in which the skeptic was no longer concerned or worried about matters beyond appearance.<sup>12</sup>

*Ataraxia* requires the suspension of judgment. Among the Pyrrhonists, *ataraxia* was necessary for bringing about *eudemonia* (happiness) for a person, representing life’s ultimate purpose. Their method of achieving *ataraxia* was through achieving *epochē*.

*Epochē* is the suspension of judgement. And it is not the same as *ataraxia* although the latter is relationally induced or brought about by the former for the sake of *eudemonia*. The issue is that we are first brought to *epochē* and then to *ataraxia*.

For Sextus Empiricus, skepticism was not a denial of the possibility of finding truth, nor was it a denial of the basic facts of human experience.

<sup>9</sup> Stumpf, 120.

<sup>10</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Logicians*, trans. Robert Gregg Bury (London: W. Heinemann, 1935), 179.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Bett, *Sextus Empiricus: Against the Physicists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 221.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 121.

Instead, it was “the view that questions whether any of our beliefs can be supported by adequate or sufficient evidence.”<sup>13</sup> This form of skepticism shows that skepticism is a continuous process of inquiry in which every explanation of experience is tested by a counter experience.

In the early hours of Platonic dialogues, Socrates was seen questioning the knowledge claims of others. And in the *Apology*, he stated that all he really knew was that he knew nothing. Obviously, this Socratic skepticism was not a complete denial of the possibility of true knowledge. Rather it was a method where the mind refrained from quick judgement or accepting anything which it was not too sure of.

Furthermore, Socrates’ enemy, the Sophist Protagoras, also did contend that “man is the measure of all things, of what is, that it is, and what is not, it is not.”<sup>14</sup> This thesis showed a kind of skeptical relativism. For it was taken that no views were ultimately true, but each was merely one man’s opinion.

Gorgias wrote a book to prove that nothing exists, that even if anything were to exist, it would be impossible to know and communicate it. This does not still show that Gorgias totally denied the possibility of true knowledge. Unfortunately, many have misconstrued this to be that Gorgias totally denied the possibility of true knowledge. The truth is that Gorgias’ form of skeptical nihilism questions the capacity of the human mind to comprehend the nature of reality. It looks like what Scott Aikin refers to as regress problem in epistemology which states that if one has good reasons to believe something, one must have good reason to hold those reasons are good. And for those reasons, one must have further reasons to hold that they are good, and so a regress of reasons looms.<sup>15</sup>

In Augustine’s *Contra Academicos*, which was influenced by the works of Cicero and the Platonism of the Middle Academy, Augustine stated that “skepticism can be completely overcome only by revelation. And from this standpoint, philosophy was considered faith seeking understanding (fides quarens intellectu).”<sup>16</sup> This is really a Fideist voice, the type that will be heard from the Fideist of the Renaissance period.

Michael de Ayguem Montaigne is of the view that his own skepticism was a “New Skepticism.” Stumpf states this thus: “Montaigne looked upon himself as an unpremeditated philosopher; one who was not confined

<sup>13</sup> Eboh, 16-17.

<sup>14</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. Joe Sachs (Newburyport, MA: R. Pullins Co., 2004), 166d.

<sup>15</sup> Scott F. Aikin, *Epistemology and the Regress Problem* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 2.

<sup>16</sup> Juan Comesaña, and Peter Klein, “Skepticism,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2019 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/skepticism/>.

intellectually to some rigid set of ideas within which his thoughts and life must be expressed.”<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, in his *Essays*, Montaigne confessed that even though he was one of those who normally condemned such stories concerning ghosts and prophesies, he has come to find out that “it is a foolish presumption to slight and condemn things as false because they do not appear to us as probable...”<sup>18</sup>

Consequently, in the follow-up work, *Apologie de Raimond*, Montaigne held that the reason why we should not condemn things as false just because they do not appear probable to us is that the criteria employed to determine standards of judgments are themselves open to question and doubt, unless God gives us some indubitable first principles and makes our faculties reliable.<sup>19</sup>

The truth Montaigne is saying is that unaided by divine grace, all of man’s achievements even those of the most recent sciences become dubious. But contending that personal and cultural sentiments influence people’s judgments and that the senses are unreliable, Montaigne further suggests that we should judge with moderation, reverence, and prudence and with greater acknowledgement of our ignorance and infirmity compared with the infinite power of nature.<sup>20</sup>

In the same vein, Francisco Sanches in his book *Quad Nihil Scitus* in 1581 used classical arguments to doubt science in Aristotelian sense, arguing that giving necessary reasons for causes would lead to infinite regress because true knowledge of the behavior of nature cannot be attained.<sup>21</sup>

The most fundamental skepticism in the modern time was launched by David Hume between 1711 and 1776. Before Hume was René Descartes (who published his *Meditationes* in 1641), and was known for his methodic skepticism or methodic doubt. Descartes’ doubt had the chief aim of providing rules for clear and orderly thinking. It was an effort to help the mind overcome the deception of the senses. Earlier in his work, Descartes had lamented saying,

Whatever I have up till now accepted as most true, I have acquired from the senses or through the senses. But from time to

<sup>17</sup> “Pyrrhonian Skepticism,” in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi, 738-741 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>18</sup> Richard Popkin, *Philosophy Made Simple* (London: Made Simple Books, 1981), 168.

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Omorogbe, *Epistemology (Theory of Knowledge): A Systematic and Historical Study* (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Ltd., 1991), 168.

<sup>20</sup> Stumpf, 120.

<sup>21</sup> *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 101.

time, I have found out that the senses deceive. And it is prudence never to trust completely, those who have deceived us once.<sup>22</sup>

Consequently, Descartes formulated four methodic principles or rules which would always govern people's discussions and to help them minimize fallacies so that one would never misplace truth for falsehood or vice versa. The climax of Descartes' methodic doubt was the discovery of the indubitable truth: *Cogito ergo sum* – I think therefore I am (*Je pense donc je suis*). This truth was the fertile ground upon which Descartes proved the existence of things, man and God included.<sup>23</sup>

One should recall that the British empiricists were generally known for their dictum: “*nihil est in intellectu quod prius non fuerit in sensu*” meaning that nothing is in the intellect that first was not in the senses. Through this dictum, they contended that experience is the origin of all knowledge. Hume was led to this form of Empiricist skepticism in the end, by his early faith in reason. He did not think that adherence to reason could lead the mind to any absolute truth. Hence, he taught that in nature, there existed no absolute principle derivable by reason upon which depends the meaning and the knowledge of reality.

For Hume, object in nature existed separately; the movement from what is (a matter of fact) to what we ought to do or required (the qualities we place on objects and actions) was a logical jump. Hence there was no necessary logical inference from what is, to what ought to be. There was no necessary connection between cause and effect. Thus,

all our reasoning concerning causes and effects were derived from nothing but custom; and belief was more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cognitive part of our natures.<sup>24</sup>

Further still, Hume stated that the principle of causality could neither be demonstrated nor known by intuition. The idea of cause for him, therefore, was derived from the principle of frequent association of things that generally go together. It was by this association that we knew that things were contingently caused by the other.

Hume was the most thorough-going skeptic among the empiricists that his sweeping doubts about causality, the self, substance and metaphysical knowledge, Kant says, woke him up from his dogmatic slumber.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1999), 12.

<sup>23</sup> René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, ed. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 13.

<sup>24</sup> Stumpf, 213.

<sup>25</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, trans. and ed. Gary Hatfield

Kant attempted to synthesize the rationalists' and empiricists' proposition into his synthetic a-priori knowledge. He posited space and time as the two a priori categories presupposed in knowing. Finally, Kant divided reality into phenomena and noumena, holding that while the phenomena (things-as-they-appear) are knowable, the noumena (things-in-themselves) are unknowable.<sup>26</sup>

The contemporary period further witnessed the linguistic skepticism of Fritz Mauthner, whose critique of language in *Analysis of Language* led to a total skepticism about the possibility of genuine language. For him, language was both social and individual, and showed only what linguistic conventions were used at a given time, and what features of experiences they named in various ways.<sup>27</sup> Each language, according to Mauthner, expressed a worldview (*weltanschauung*), and what was called language was always relative to this outlook.<sup>28</sup> This just looked like Ludwig Wittgenstein's language game theory,<sup>29</sup> which also got clearly spelled out in his other work: *On Certainty*.<sup>30</sup>

George Santayana was a naturalistic skeptic who in his book, *Skepticism and Animal Faith*, insisted that "nothing given, existed as it was given; all belief about what was given was open to question."<sup>31</sup> He wanted to carry skepticism even higher than Hume, hoping that when the full force of skepticism was realized, one could appreciate what was in fact absolutely indubitable.

Albert Camus was an existential skeptic influenced by the skepticism of Soren Kierkegaard, Leon Shestove and Frederick Nietzsche. Nietzsche's skepticism, regarding religion and objective values rejected the Fideist mentality of overcoming skeptical puzzles by Leap of Faith. Thus, Camus accepted Nietzsche's view of meaninglessness of the world because of the "Death of God." And being so skeptical about the possibility of metaphysical knowledge, like other skeptics, Camus contended that the human situation which involves a constant futile effort to achieve understanding and meaning in an unintelligible and meaningless world, was absurd.<sup>32</sup>

In summary, it is now made clear that skepticism, contrary to popular opinions, meant generally more than total denial of the possibility of true

---

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 4:260.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 4:313.

<sup>27</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Eric Steinberg (Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing Co., 1993), 7, 2, 59.

<sup>28</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 55.

<sup>29</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 23.

<sup>30</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe, and G. H. von Wright, trans. Denis Paul (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969), 2.

<sup>31</sup> *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 453.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 453.

knowledge. Instead, it meant more of inquiry, and doubt among the members of the Platonic Academy. It was true that Sextus Empiricus, Pyrrho and Montaigne conceived it as investigation; moderation; and suspension; and above all, as a rule of life, it still remains what Descartes saw it to be: a methodological attainment of certainty while Hume perceived it as a radical means of deconstruction and doubt.

The contemporary linguistic philosophers like Fritz Mauthner and Wittgenstein, on their side also saw skepticism as a tool of relativism where language was argued to have meaning only as it expressed a world-outlook or language game. Hence George Santayana could reason that it is a process of interpretation or Animal Faith. There is no doubt that Albert Camus was influenced by Nietzsche and thus was led to pessimism about the human situation while Russell moved from pessimism to Gnosticism.

The above explanations suggest that from antiquity, skepticism has never had a uniform practice although it stood for one and the same thing, which is suspension of judgement until all doubts have been cleared.

### III. Categorization of Skepticism

There have been efforts to classify skepticism as ‘absolute’ or ‘moderate skepticism.’ This is because following the above explanations, some skeptics tended towards radical skepticism than the others; and so they should be called absolute skeptics and the other moderate skeptics.

#### a. Absolute Skepticism

Absolute skepticism is to be self-stultifying because it tends towards nihilism. The word *nihilism* is originally derived from the Latin word *nihil* which means “nothing.” So, *nihilism* is the state of mind that doubts the existence of something or better put, nihilists are said to be those who doubt the reality of existence. In the *Webster International Dictionary*, *nihilism* is portrayed as

a viewpoint that all traditional values and beliefs are unfounded and that all existence is consequently senseless and useless. In fact, it is a denial of intrinsic meaning and value of life...a doctrine that no reality exists.<sup>33</sup>

The nihilists were said to deny the relevance of traditional values like laws and customs; hence they argued that such values – as natural law – were unfounded. It was based on this that some skeptics were branded nihilists.

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 453-454.

But the question one needs to ask at this point is this: if there were skeptics who truly denied that there were intrinsic values and meaning to life when they presented their arguments as meaningful, does that truly make them nihilists? The answer to this question is a capital “No,” because nihilism is not defensible in the face of their denial of intrinsic value and meaning to life because to say that existence is senseless implies that their arguments were also senseless in so far as they were part of existence. In that case, there were no real nihilists. Instead, there were simply skeptics in the strictest sense of it.

Again, we should note that different nihilist positions existed. While some held variously those human values were baseless, others held that life was meaningless, and still there were those who believed that knowledge was impossible or that some set of entities did not exist. In whichever positions or forms there were, the same question and answer still applied: If there were skeptics who truly denied that there were intrinsic values and meaning to life when they presented their arguments as meaningful, does that truly make them nihilists? The answer again remains “No,” because nihilism could not be defensible in the face of their denial of intrinsic value and meaning to life when they maintained that existence was senseless. And this would have implied that their arguments were also senseless in so far as they were part of existence.

Now the fact that radical skeptics like Nietzsche and Russell were normally quite notorious could not still account for the reason why many would mistakenly identify their skepticism with nihilism, i.e., as extreme position. Nietzsche’s crisis of nihilism derived from two central concepts: the destruction of higher values and the opposition to the affirmation of life. His writing, which, according to Lawrence J. Hatab<sup>34</sup> contained significant references to nihilism,<sup>35</sup> issued a radical attack on traditional belief system, and often echoed many of the pronouncements of nihilism. Yet this would not make Nietzsche to be frequently taken to be a nihilist. Instead, he was a skeptic in the strictest sense of the term skepticism.

On this count, Richard Schacht<sup>36</sup> demonstrated that Nietzsche had a dual attitude towards nihilism. For him, the question of whether Nietzsche was a true nihilist must be answered in both ways of Yes and No; affirmatively, if nihilism meant a denial of traditional belief systems, and negatively if it meant the denial of any value, meaning or truth in the world. According to him, Nietzsche accepted a restricted form of nihilism that denied a realm of “true being” apart from this world and a transcendently grounded system of

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Stumpf, 214.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 215.

values. Also, Nietzsche saw complete nihilism (as here defined) as decadent, dangerous, and something to overcome. In other words, if Nietzsche saw complete nihilism as dangerous, decadent and as something to overcome, it means that he could not have been taken as a nihilist in that strict sense of the word. And since his version of nihilism was rooted in the Christian-moral tradition, it would be safe to say as Schacht did insist that Nietzsche cannot also be considered a nihilist in the strict sense of the term because even in his denial, he advocated for such doctrines as the will to power and eternal recurrence. And based on this, talking about absolute skepticism would amount to a mirage.

### b. Moderate Skepticism

On the other hand, moderate skepticism was considered as constructive and served as both a philosophical methodology and epistemological attitude of doubts aiding knowledge. Also, moderate skepticism was thought as the moderate mood of doubt about some several, or single thing, but never everything. The moderate skeptics were said to be known by what they doubt and how long they doubted.

In Samuel Stumpf's *Introduction to Philosophy*, Sextus Empiricus was said to be a moderate skeptic; hence he argued that evident matters such as whether it was night or day raised no serious problems of knowledge. In this category were evident requirements for social and personal tranquility, for we knew that customs and laws bound societies together. But non-evident matters, as for example, whether the stuff of nature was made of atoms, some fiery substances, did raise some intellectual controversies.<sup>37</sup>

So, based on this, moderate skepticism was seen to be "partial," "sensory," "rational," and "methodic." It was also said to be relative. Under moderate skepticism were also ethical, religious, and other forms of skepticism, which restricted doubt to definite areas. But unlike what was called "nihilist skeptics," who "doubt almost everything," the moderate skeptic doubted only metaphysical knowledge since evident matters posed no puzzle. The empiricists and positivists were said to belong to this group since for them, opinions, statements and matters were to be doubted if and only if they were obscure.<sup>38</sup>

Many have categorized Descartes as a moderate skeptic because in his *Meditation on First Philosophy*, he had this to say: "It will not

<sup>37</sup> Webster's Third New International Dictionary, vol. 19 (Springfield, MA: Marriam Webster, 1987), 1528.

<sup>38</sup> John P. Dougherty, ed., *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 36 (New York: A.M.S., 1983), 846-847.

be necessary for me to show that all my opinions are false, which are nothing but illusions and dreams.”<sup>39</sup> On another occasion, he added:

Whatever I have up till now accepted as most true, I have acquired from the senses or through the senses. But from time to time, I have found out that the senses deceive. And it is prudence never to trust completely those who have deceived us once.<sup>40</sup>

But to affirm or deny that Descartes was truly a moderate skeptic would depend on how one is able to understand the fact that Descartes’ philosophy was dominated by his personal quest for certainty. Although this was not a preoccupation peculiar or unique or him and/or his age, there were such traumatic transition periods in the history of understanding such that it became more obvious that old assumptions did not work any longer since they no longer fitted the experience of the world. So, it was at such time like this that philosophic mind as Descartes’ were driven to critical reassessment of the very foundation of what he already knew.

So, Descartes’ background as a geometer really paved way for him in his search for the indubitable truth or certainty that he required. However, using the method of geometry to think about the world, Descartes found the foundation of such “self-evident” propositions upon which whole geometrical systems can be built. It was this “methodic” form of skepticism that led him to doubt everything – *de omnibus dubitandum*; suspending belief in the knowledge he learned from childhood. In his *First Meditation on the First Philosophy*,<sup>41</sup> he reiterated his firm doubt on all those things “which I allowed myself in youth to be persuaded without having inquired into their truth.”<sup>42</sup> So Descartes’ doubt was methodic; hence it served him as a deliberate strategy for proceeding toward certainty. In that case, and like the rest of others before him, the so-called absolute or radical skeptics – Descartes became a doubter not by nature, but by necessity. For what he really wanted was to be secure so he could stop doubting.

It was this methodic suspension of belief that really got him to the point where he could no longer doubt his existence. Then it became clear to him that what he couldn’t doubt any longer was the fact that he was the same

---

<sup>39</sup> Lawrence J. Hatab, “Nietzsche, Nihilism and Meaning,” *The Personalist Forum* 3, no. 2 (1987): 91-111.

<sup>40</sup> Omoregbe, *Epistemology*, 168

<sup>41</sup> René Descartes, “Meditations on First Philosophy,” in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, vol. 1, ed. Elizabeth S. Haldane, and G. R. T. Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), 28.

<sup>42</sup> Stumpf, 120.

man doubting. And this realization led him to the knowledge of his own existence, for if he could doubt the existence of every other thing; he could not doubt his own existence, for he had to exist first before he could doubt. On this truth, Descartes became the author of his famous phrase in Western philosophy: *Cogito ergo sum*, or, originally, *Je pense, donc je suis* – “I think, therefore I am or (exist)!” This secure anchor, no doubt, became the basis of Descartes’ philosophical system, and he proceeded to infer the rest of his “truths.”

The lesson here is that both Nietzsche and Descartes would have differed in one way or the other, for they would have had their individual methods still within the skeptics’ tradition, but this did not qualify one to become an absolute skeptic or nihilist and the other moderate skeptics. There is no reason to say either of them is a radical skeptic or moderate skeptic than the other. The truth is that both of them qualified as both moderate as well as absolute skeptics no matter what meaning we give to it. So there is no reason to see one as absolute or radical and the other as moderate. After all, nihilism would never have been defensible in the face of their denial of intrinsic value and meaning to life since to say that existence was senseless implied that their arguments were also senseless in so far as they were part of existence.

#### IV. Comments on the relationship between *Ataraxia* and/or ‘*Epoche*’ and/or ‘*Aponia*’

Briefly, we shall comment on how *ataraxia* relates to *epochē* and *aponia*. There has been effort to equate *ataraxia* with the word *epochē* and *aponia*. This is wrong because they were not meant to be the same thing *ab initio*. While *ataraxia* is a Greek word literally translated as “imperturbability,” “equanimity,” or “tranquility,” and which first appeared in the works of Pyrrho though subsequently used by Epicurus and the Stoics, it does not mean the same as *epochē* or *aponia*. *Ataraxia* refers to “freedom from worry and anxiety.” In other words, it was “a state of calmness of mind in the face of seemingly intractable disagreement.” Among the Pyrrhonists, *ataraxia* was necessary for bringing about *eudemonia* (happiness) for a person, representing life’s ultimate purpose. The method of achieving *ataraxia* was through achieving *epochē*.

*Epochē* on the other hand, is the suspension of judgement according to Sextus Empiricus.<sup>43</sup> And it is not the same as *ataraxia*, although the latter is relationally induced or brought about by the former for the sake of *eudemonia*. The issue is that we are first brought to *epochē* and then to *ataraxia*.

---

<sup>43</sup> Jonathan Barnes, ‘Introduction,’ in Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Skepticism*, trans. Julia Annas, and Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), xix ff.

For the Epicureans, the concept of *ataraxia* was highly valued because of how pleasure was understood as highest good. For them, those who achieved freedom from physical disturbance were in a state of *aporia*, that was understood as “the absence of physical pain.” Therefore, the concept of *ataraxia* is thus far removed from the sense in which the Epicureans used the concept of ‘*aporia*’ because those who achieved freedom from mental disturbance were in a state of *ataraxia*.<sup>44</sup>

This distinction is very important to our discussion because while *epoché* induces *ataraxia*, *ataraxia* is not the same as *aporia*; hence the “absence of physical pain” is not one and the same thing as “the absence of mental disturbance.” Therefore, as *epoché* in Pyrrhonism it is indicated “a suspension of judgment or belief for the sake of inner peace, especially while faced with a precipice,” the state of *ataraxia* was brought about by eschewing beliefs (dogma) about thoughts and perceptions;<sup>45</sup> hence the values of skepticism.

## V. The values of skepticism

The values of skepticism are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, the strength of skepticism lies not in whether it is tenable as a position but in the force of the arguments of its proposers against the claims of dogmatic philosophers. Popkin was said to have argued that without skepticism, probably we could not distinguish enthusiasm, prejudice, or superstition from serious or meaningful beliefs. Perceived in this direction, we can describe skepticism as an epistemological fiery furnace where opinions are purified like gold.

Again, Popkin was further said to have contended that skepticism was instrumental to the birth of the modern epistemology at the hands of Descartes who was referred to as a moderate and methodological skeptic. This point is made clearer, of course because while the metaphysical frame of the later rationalists like Leibniz and Spinoza was merely an advancement of Descartes’, the all-important epistemological contributions of the British empiricists was a response thesis to Descartes. Kant admitted that Hume’s skepticism woke him up from his dogmatic slumber. No wonder he is called the father of modern philosophy.

On the practical level, what strikes the mind immediately is the classical skepticism of Michel Eyquem de Montaigne who lived from 1553 to 1592 in France. For Montaigne, skepticism neither meant pessimism in all things as a mood, nor license as a rule to do anything one wants. Instead, it was a

<sup>44</sup> Frederich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Modern Library, 1968), 67; Richard Schacht, “Nietzsche and Nihilism,” in *Nietzsche: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Robert Solomon (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1973), 165.

<sup>45</sup> Stumpf, 121.

source for a positive affirmation of all the facets of human life. That was why he advised people to start their philosophy of life by reflecting upon matters close at hand; such that, a good place to begin would be one's own personal experience, given that "every man carries within himself, the whole conditions of humanity."<sup>46</sup> For this reason, Montaigne felt that whatever proved useful to himself might also serve useful to someone else.

This frame of mind reflects Kant's categorical imperative: "Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law."<sup>47</sup> This maxim, of course, points to the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would like others to do to you." And in order to live up to this rule, Montaigne considered "contentment" as basic in life. Contentment can only be achieved through mental tranquility, but mental tranquility itself is achieved, according to Montaigne, when people concern themselves with existential phenomena; leaving out metaphysical problems to wane and die on their own.

However, Montaigne regrettably pointed out that the saddest spectacle of all is to find people formulating final answers on questions that are far too subtle and variable for such a treatment. The final folly of this attempt to capture the perfect and permanent truth is the mind of fanaticism and dogmatism. By the above lamentation, Montaigne attacked both the system-building philosophers who claim to be the unriddlers of the universe, and also the religious fanatics who caused wars and fierce religious persecution in the bid to perpetrate one kind of absolute law or the other.

For those who could perpetrate any kind of evil to humanity under any guise, Montaigne blamed such cruelty as fanaticism caused by lack of inner peace. He then believed genuinely that a mood of constructive skepticism could prevent such an outburst of cruelty, because, "in the true skepticism, human energies could be directed toward manageable subjects and purposes."<sup>48</sup> According to Stumpf, Montaigne "adopted as his own, the central insight of classical skepticism, using this formula: 'I stop-I examine-I take for my guide the ways of the world and the experience of the senses.'"<sup>49</sup> The above principle looks like the Socratic injunction, "Man know thy self, for an unexamined life is not worth living."

Another great figure is Socrates. The skepticism of Socrates was visible in the way he engages his listener to argumentation. Unlike the Sophists who tried to show that truth or knowledge was impossible, Socrates accepted the

<sup>46</sup> Descartes, *The Philosophical Works*, 12.

<sup>47</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 4:421.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>49</sup> Descartes, *Meditations*, 23.

possibility of truth and tried to link knowing and doing. For him, knowledge was virtue, and ignorance was the cause of vice.

Socrates' engagement in the "dialectic" was never for end destructive of truth nor to develop pragmatic skills among lawyers and politicians, but to achieve concepts of truth and goodness. His clash with the Athenian government on account of being a "corrupter of the youth," and for which he paid with his life, got him the reputation of "an intellectual dealing in paradoxes and, worse still, of thinking freely on matters about which many Athenians believed that discussions should be closed."<sup>50</sup> He was regarded a true skeptic; hence he taught the youth to live authentic lives as he did.<sup>51</sup>

## VI. Should Skepticism then be discredited?

Those who misunderstood the meaning and scope of skepticism thought it was opposed to knowledge hence it should be resisted or discredited. But contrary to them and from our discussion so far, skepticism is supportive of knowledge. Wittgenstein once thought he had detested skepticism without knowing he soaked himself deeply in constructive skepticism although he would still not like himself to be identified as a skeptic. This truth is contained in the work of Garfield when he admitted that Wittgenstein, of course, frequently denied that he was a skeptic. He writes: "Skepticism is not irrefutable, but obvious nonsense..."<sup>52</sup> But I would argue that the position Wittgenstein denotes by "skepticism" is what I am calling 'nihilism'.<sup>53</sup> In that sense, both skepticism and nihilism meant the same thing for Garfield.<sup>54</sup>

However, the type of response Wittgenstein repeatedly offered to the skeptical problems posed by nihilistic arguments was characteristically skeptical. The point is that one needs to be skeptical to doubt the certainty of skeptical arguments. Hence philosophers as Wittgenstein and others who put up healthy arguments against skepticism were simply being truly skeptical.

Obviously, the skeptics contributed a great deal to the development of epistemology in Western philosophy by challenging the claim to know and the basis of such knowledge. The critical and sometimes devastating challenges of the skeptics spurred the epistemologists on to continually re-examine the nature, the basis and the justification of knowledge.

<sup>50</sup> Jane Friedman, "Why Suspend Judging?" *Nous* 51, no. 2 (2017): 302-326.

<sup>51</sup> Jane Friedman, "Suspended Judgment," *Philosophical Studies* 162, no. 2 (2013): 165-181.

<sup>52</sup> Stumpf, 120-121.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>54</sup> Jay L. Garfield, "Epochē and Śūnyatā: Skepticism East and West," *Philosophy East and West* 40, no. 3 (1990): 304.

Epistemologists had to do this in order to find answers to the challenges of the skeptics, and to refute them.

One of them was Goodman who criticized skepticism on the thinking that it obstructed knowledge because of its application of suspension therapy. Indeed, he writes:

Like the positivist and the radical empiricist, he (the skeptic) is barred by his own principle from going beyond phenomena at all by way of interpretation. The result is that none of the conundrums or antinomies which arise in experience itself or our 'natural' responses to it can be confronted by him in any way...The net out-come of the skeptic's perfection of his critical capabilities is their complete suspension.<sup>55</sup>

This is a clear criticism but what he did not realize was the fact that while "suspension therapy" seem apparently to be negative, it gave room for investigation and convictions through which inviolable certainty could be attempted on something (if probable), instead of hastily condemning that out of ignorance or dogmatically accepting it out of myopia. It is therefore wrong to accuse the skeptics as unable to resolve most of the questions they generated; after all, skeptics did not think that in philosophy, questions were more important than answers.

The antimonies which Sextus Empiricus enjoined them to formulate were not meant to be resolved since that was the best way to show the dogmatists that they may not have found the complete truth as they claim. It is not also true that the skeptics were intellectually redundant and inactive in philosophic enterprise as infants, unphilosophic adults or common men. Skeptics were active men with strong intellectual and philosophic mind.<sup>56</sup>

## VII. Conclusion

Man is a being constantly in search of true knowledge. Skepticism afforded man that single opportunity to sift knowledge before consuming. Hence skepticism was both a philosophical method and an epistemological attitude towards knowledge. No doubts, there were various skeptics in history. While some skeptics were seen as extreme, others were regarded as moderate. In whichever way or form one found himself, both extreme skepticism and moderate skepticism were one and the same. They were led by one single passion: investigation and inquiry into the truth of things before consuming.

---

<sup>55</sup> Stumpf, 215.

<sup>56</sup> Dougherty, 846-847.

Whether some doubts of the skeptics were directed to almost everything, including knowledge and existence, even to the point of denying them possible existence or directed only to the possibility of arriving at indubitable truth, skepticism remains a method of inquiry towards certain knowledge. The moderate skeptics said things existed and knowledge was possible, but the problem lied with discovering a reliable criterion of indubitable certainty. The so-called radical skeptics believed this too.

In the final discussion of this work therefore, it is now clear that skepticism should not be discredited. Instead, it should be applauded and accepted for what it is. The doctrine of skepticism demands that whoever wants certain knowledge should and must proceed through doubt. It is no longer the case ordinarily, that one would accept entirely all that one is told simply because it comes from a sage, or a tradition. On this note, the paper concludes that the best way to certainty or rather whoever wants knowledge should proceed through doubt.

## References

Aikin, Scott F. *Epistemology and the Regress Problem*. New York: Routledge, 2011.

Annas, Julia, and Jonathan Barnes. *Pyrrhonian Skepticism: Sextus, Empiricus. Outlines of Skepticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Audi, Robert. *Belief, Justification and Knowledge: An Introduction to Epistemology*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1988.

Bittle, Celestine Nicholas. *Reality and the Mind*. Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1936.

Comesaña, Juan, and Peter Klein.“Skepticism.” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*(Winter 2019 Edition). Edited by Edward N. Zalta. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/skepticism/>.

Descartes, René.“Meditations on First Philosophy.” In *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, vol. 1. Edited by Elizabeth S. Haldane, and G. R. T. Ross. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911.

Descartes, René. *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*. Translated by Donald A. Cress. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1999.

Descartes, René. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. Edited by John Cottingham. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

Dougherty, John P., ed. *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 36. New York: A.M.S., 1983.

Eboh, Ben Okwu. *Basic Issues in the Theory of Knowledge*. Nsukka: Fulladu Publishing Company, 1995.

*Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edited by Paul Edwards. New York: Macmillan, 1967.

Friedman, Jane. "Suspended Judgment." *Philosophical Studies* 162, no. 2 (2013): 165-181.

Friedman, Jane. "Why Suspend Judging?" *Nous* 51, no. 2 (2017): 302-326.

Garfield, Jay L. "Epochē and Śūnyatā: Skepticism East and West." *Philosophy East and West* 40, no. 3 (1990): 285-307.

Hatab, Lawrence J. "Nietzsche, Nihilism and Meaning." *The Personalist Forum* 3, no. 2 (1987): 91-111.

Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge. Revised by P. H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978.

Hume, David. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Edited by Eric Steinberg. Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing Co., 1993.

Kant, Immanuel. *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Translated and edited by Mary Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Kant, Immanuel. *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*. Translated and edited by Gary Hatfield. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Nietzsche, Frederich. *The Gay Science*. Translated by Walter Kaufman. New York: Modern Library, 1968.

Omoredge, Joseph. *A Simplified History of Western Philosophy*, vol. 2: "Modern Philosophy." Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Ltd., 1991.

Omoredge, Joseph. *Epistemology (Theory of Knowledge): A Systematic and Historical Study*. Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Ltd., 1991.

Plato. *Theaetetus*. Translated by Joe Sachs. Newburyport, MA: R. Pullins Co., 2004.

Popkin, Henry Richard. "Skepticism." *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 7, 44-46. London: Made Simple Books, 1967.

Popkin, Richard Henry. *Philosophy Made Simple*. London: Made Simple Books, 1981.

Richard, Bett. *Sextus Empiricus: Against the Physicists*. Translated by R. G. Bury. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Schacht, Richard. "Nietzsche and Nihilism." In *Nietzsche: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Robert C. Solomon. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1973.

Sextus Empiricus. *Against the Logicians*. Translated by Robert Gregg Bury. London: W. Heinemann, 1935.

Stumpf, Samuel. *Philosophy: History & Problems*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994.

*Webster's Third New International Dictionary*. Springfield, MA: Marriam Webster, 1987.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *On Certainty*. Edited by G. E. M. Anscombe, and G. H. von Wright. Translated by Denis Paul. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981.

