

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In this work of mine I would try to analyze scepticism in its relation to morality and examine its viability. Though, the problem of moral scepticism has its own specific character and questions, yet it is located within the broader framework of philosophical scepticism. Hence, we shall begin with a general account of what scepticism is, tracing its development from the ancient to the modern times. Needless to say, scepticism is a recurrent philosophical concern. It prevails from the ancient period to the contemporary times. Philosophical enquiry in general and epistemological enquiry in particular are not complete or even, one may say, cannot get started, without answering or silencing the sceptical doubt. Scepticism is not something to be bypassed or ignored.

Scepticism has taken different forms down the ages and the arguments used by the sceptic are equally diverse. Thematically, however, scepticism is basically scepticism about knowledge. It doubts every kind of thing people claim to know, namely, that there is an external world, that other people have experiences, that there is self-knowledge – (knowledge of the internal world), that there is moral knowledge or that there are moral values, that we can know or justify the belief that God exists and so on. Scepticism touches all these things, but in different ways and with different effects. In case of the external world, the question raised by the sceptic is, how can we know any of the things we say about the world to be true. In the case of other minds, the problem, perhaps, is not so much about how do we know that other people have feelings as we do, but how much do we really know about these feelings. For, the possibility of shamming cannot be ruled out. Regarding self-knowledge, the doubt is

about whether the supposed owner of the experiences is an immaterial mind or a physical body or a brain-in-vat.

It is difficult to define scepticism precisely, but some broad characterization can be stated by attending to the etymology of the word, as has been noted by R.G. Burry¹. The word 'skeptic' means simply 'an inquirer' or 'an investigator'. Etymologically understood, the word 'scepticism' is derived *via* Latin, from a Greek term '*skeptics*', that means "to seek" and also "a seeker", "one who seeks" and such like. The term 'sceptic' (from Greek '*skeptikos*') stands for a person who performs a much wider range of activities: he is thoughtful, reflective; he examines, inquires, considers and looks about carefully². Etymologically, then, a sceptic is an inquirer, or one who reflects. In this sense, we should all be proud to be called sceptics. This ancient meaning of scepticism, etymologically derived, however, fails to capture either the nature of the initial stages of the sceptical tradition in Greek philosophy or the current usage of the term in everyday discourse and in philosophical literature. Certainly, the sceptic inquires into various topics, but what is distinctive about his inquiry is that it focuses upon the question of whether or not we can have knowledge of the subject matter under examination, and concludes that either knowledge is not possible, or that, even if we are in possession of knowledge, we cannot establish that we are.

Scepticism has a long history. We have already mentioned that. It is found in all ages and climes. From the historical dimension, for example, the two most influential forms of scepticism, have, arguably, been the radical epistemological scepticism of the classical Pyrrhonian sceptics and the Cartesian form of radical epistemological scepticism that Descartes considers in his *Meditations*. The spirit of

both these historical approaches lives on in the contemporary discussion of scepticism. Before we take them up for discussion in some details, we shall provide a sketch of other skeptics that flourished in the Greek tradition.

I

Historically, sceptical tendencies could be found in pre-Socratic philosophy. The seeds of scepticism in the form of human inability to discover any fixed, immutable truth about reality beyond the universal flux are found in the metaphysical theory of Heraclitus. Cratylus, from this view, led to a broader scepticism and held that communication was impossible because, since the speaker, the auditor, and the words were changing, whatever meaning might have been intended by the words would be altered by the time they were heard³. Xenophanes denied the existence of any criteria of true knowledge. For him, if man, by chance, came across the truth, he would not be able to distinguish it from error since there is no criterion for the same.⁴ The sophists, for example, Gorgias and Protagoras, then raised some serious sceptical doubts. Gorgias is said to have doubted whether anything existed. He claimed that if anything existed, we could not know it and if we could know it, we could not communicate it⁵. The sceptical tendency is also found in Protagoras' dictum – 'Man is the measure of all things' (*Homo Mensura*). The conclusion of *homo mensura* not only shows the relativism of knowledge, but also its universality as an impossibility. Thus, truth is what appears to be true for each individual human being. No knowledge is valid for everyone. In other words, there is no absolute knowledge which is acceptable to everyone. What is true for one individual man, and whatever is false for another may turn out to be false or true for someone else⁶. Later Sophists like Polus, Thrasymachus and Critius denied objectivity in moral codes, in principles of politics, etc.

In the ancient Greek thought two varieties of scepticism are distinguished – the academic scepticism and the Pyrrhonian scepticism. Plato, though himself not a sceptic, deals extensively with it in his dialogues, *Gorgias* and *Protagoras*, thereby implying that scepticism was a dominant tendency in his time, and he had to take them in his stride. Scepticism as a philosophical methodology was developed from the Socratic observation, “All I know is that I know nothing,” by the leaders like Arcesilaus (c.315 – c.240 B.C.) and Carneades (c. 213 – 128 B.C.) of Plato’s Academy in the 3rd century B.C. That gave birth to what is called Academic Scepticism. It is so-called because it originated in Plato’s Academic. The attack of Arcesilaus was directed primarily against the Stoics and that of Carneades against both Epicureans and Stoics⁷. Popkin in this regard writes:

The Stoics had claimed that there were some perceptions which could not possibly be false either *per se* or as signs of the true nature of reality. Arcesilaus and Carneades pointed out that there was no criterion for distinguishing a perception of this kind from one that appeared to be so, or was thought to be so. Carneades insisted that there were no intrinsic marks or signs which these so-called real propositions possessed, and that no justifiable criterion existed for separating one type from the other. Therefore, he contended, we must suspend judgment about whether reliable reorientations of objects actually exist. This state of affairs, the Academics maintained, showed that no assertions about what is going on beyond or immediate

experience are certain. The best data that we can acquire, they said, only tell us what is reasonable or possible, but not what is true.⁸

These arguments have come down to us, especially in the writings of Cicero, Diogenes Laertius and Saint Augustine. The aim of the Academic sceptical philosophers was to show, by a group of arguments and dialectical puzzles, that the dogmatic philosopher (i.e., the philosopher who asserts that he knows some truth about the real nature of things), could not know with absolute certainty the propositions he said he knew. The Academics formulated a series of difficulties to show that the information we gain by means of our senses may be unreliable, that we possess no guaranteed criterion or standard for determining which of our judgments is true and which false. As a result, the Academic sceptics said that nothing is certain; everything is probable⁹.

In the second century B.C., the sceptical activity moved from the Academy to the Pyrrhonian sceptics. Pyrrhonism had its beginning in the legendary figure of Pyrrho of Elis (c.360 – c. 270 B.C), who was an unmitigated sceptic. He was claimed to be the founder of scepticism. Pyrrho, who lived even before the first Academic sceptic Arcesilaus (c.315 – c. 240 B.C.), developed scepticism as a philosophical methodology, and served as the figurehead of sceptical philosophers. Pyrrho left no writings but was, rather, the model of the sceptical way of life. The stories about him indicate that he tried to avoid committing himself to doctrines about the nature of reality while living according to appearances and attempting to attain happiness, or at least peace of mind. Pyrrhonism, as a theoretical formulation of scepticism rather than merely an emulation of Pyrrho, is supposed to have begun with Aenesidemus, who

probably taught in Alexandria in the first Century B.C. He is reported to have attacked both the Academics because they were sure that what is probable and what is improbable are distinguishable, and the dogmatic philosophers because they thought they had discovered truth. Pyrrhonian scepticism is usually contrasted with “dogmatism” which simply meant “subscription to dogmas or doctrines”. Unlike the dogmatist, who quits the philosophical inquiry once he has accepted particular doctrines, the sceptic continues the search¹⁰. There are minor skeptics of the Pyrrhonian School who have contributed in different intensities to the skeptical movement. It is only in the works of Sextus Empiricus that a full presentation of Pyrrhonian sceptics appears, with all of their dialectical weapons employed against so many philosophical theories. Hardly anything is known about the life of Sextus. It is surmised that he lived in the second century CE. He wrote in Greek. His best known work, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, contains a collection of almost all the arguments that sceptics have ever offered to show that we do not possess the knowledge, we think we do. *The Outlines*, not known to the mediaval philosophers, surfaced in the sixteenth century, and has a tremendous impact on subsequent philosophy¹¹.

Sextus was equally against the Academics and the dogmatics. The Academic sceptic says that nothing is certain; everything is probable. The dogmatic holds that he knows some truth about the real nature of things. Sextus who defines “dogma” as “assent to non-evident proposition”¹², regards doubt as a cure for the disease called dogmatism. But unlike academic scepticism which comes to a negative dogmatic conclusion from its doubt, Pyrrhonian scepticism makes no such assertion, either affirmative or negative. It was Sextus’s view that the Academic skeptics were not really sceptics, but were actually negative dogmatists. He also presented a battery of

Pyrrhonian arguments against the stoic contention that there are indicative signs in experience that indubitably reveal what is the case beyond experience.

In his *Pyrrhonianum Hypotyposes* and *Adversus Mathematicos*, Sextus Empiricus (c. 200 A.D.) set forth the Pyrrhonian tropes, as to why one should suspend judgement about all claims to knowledge extending beyond immediate experience. We want to add a clarification of the term ‘tropes’. It is a transliteration of the Greek term ‘*tropos*’, which some translators prefer to translate as “ten modes”. ‘*Tropos*’ has a technical sense meaning a pattern of argument or schemata of argument, although in ordinary Greek ‘*tropos*’ means simply ‘way’ or ‘manner’. However, what is important is the modes or tropes are in fact patterns or schemata which constitute ways inducing scepticism. We find Sextus speaking in terms of ten tropes of suspension of judgment and reporting on five tropes of Agrippa¹³.

In Pyrrho and his followers scepticism has taken the shape of a theory which says we never have good grounds for adopting a definite position on anything because for every ground in favor of a doctrine or claim there is an equally strong argument against the doctrine or claim. And all this argumentation, Sextus stated, was to lead mankind to the Pyrrhonian goal of *ataraxia* (unperturbedness). Sextus says:

The man who determines nothing as to what is naturally good or bad neither shuns nor pursues anything eagerly, and, in consequence, he is unperturbed.¹⁴

While describing scepticism Sextus says:

Skepticism is an ability or mental attitude which opposes appearances to judgments, in any way

whatsoever, with the result that, owing to the equipollence of the objects of reason thus opposed, we are brought directly first to a state of “unperturbedness” or quietude (*ataraxia*).¹⁵

In this sense, Pyrrhonian scepticism is the thesis that no opinion is permissible as final. The Pyrrhonian sceptic refuses to take any position. He urges that this conclusion is inescapable as long we hold any pretension to rational belief whatsoever, and, therefore, enjoins suspension of judgments i.e., *epoché*.

This appears to be absurd. The sceptic is threatened with a serious, indeed fundamental incoherence. He makes use of arguments; he is thereby committed, at least provisionally, to accepting the conclusions of those arguments as true. The sceptic rejects all proofs, and sets no store by argumentative procedures, and yet *epoché* is apparently brought about by argument, by reflecting that nothing can be said on either side of the question. The sceptic, however, has nothing to fear from a demonstration that his conclusion is absurd. For, as is wellknown his aim is not to establish any thesis but to induce universal suspension of judgments. *Epoché* is indeed an effect of argument but that need only mean that it is caused by argument. We do not add up the pros and cons, and find that they balance. Rather we find nothing to be said pro or con; we examine the argument but on examination they turn out to be no more persuasive than otherwise, and hence, *epoché* results. I do not conclude to anything. But having no conclusion itself amounts to *epoché*. *Epoché* is not, then, some further intellectual conclusion which the skeptic then reaches.

It is in this context that Sextus introduces his famous comparison of the sceptical slogan with purgative drugs – once they have done their job they flush

themselves out as well. Scepticism is like a great purge that eliminates everything including itself¹⁶. Sextus wrote:

And just as purgative medicines expel themselves together with the substances already present in the body, so these [skeptical] arguments are capable of cancelling themselves along with the other arguments which are said to be probative. Nor is this preposterous, since in fact the dictum 'Nothing is true' not only refutes every other saying but also nullifies itself as well.¹⁷

This is an intellectual equivalent of the suicide bomber that annihilates oneself along with the enemy.

As is well known, Sextus' aim is not to establish any thesis but to induce universal suspension of judgments. In all fairness to the sceptic it can be said that he represents an attitude of open-mindedness; stops taking side and withholds judgments. The sceptic's questionings never come to a state of rest or equilibrium; rather it is the fact that they never come to rest, but continually turn over without arriving at definite conclusions. That produces *epoché* and by consequence *ataraxia* (tranquility or calmness of mind). *Epoché* is a sort of condition supervenient upon continuous investigation (not to be characterized by the intense, manic and pathological thrust for the genuine answers), not a conclusion to that investigation. The sceptic is, in this sense, perpetually traveling hopefully, never arriving – but, since whether or not he arrives no longer matters to him, the condition is perfectly calm and squares perfectly with Sextus' actual account of the relation between *epoché* and *ataraxia* – the latter

simply comes along as the unforeseen result of the former, itself the unforeseen result of the inquiry.

To follow back the career of ancient scepticism is interesting and instructive from the historical point of view. But there is also some non-historical interest. According to some scholars of ancient scepticism, from a philosopher's point of view, the most spectacular testimony to Sextus' influence is to be found in the writings of Descartes. The arguments which Descartes and his successors expound and criticize are almost all to be found in the ancient texts¹⁸. "But there is much more in the pages of Sextus than Descartes indicates, and a philosophical reader who troubles to go back to Sextus will find at the very least a greater abundance of skeptical argumentation than modern discussion would lead him to imagine"¹⁹.

There is another point which is philosophically interesting. Modern scepticism frequently represents itself as issuing a challenge to knowledge. But the sceptical challenge leads all our beliefs intact provided that we do not claim that our beliefs amount to knowledge. Nevertheless, we are justified in holding them. The ancient sceptics, particularly the more orthodox and rigorous Pyrrhonian sceptics such as Sextus Empiricus, not merely argued that man is unable to achieve knowledge, but also denied that he can attain any such things as reasonable belief. Under the all-out sceptical pressure, our beliefs turn out to be groundless, and that we have no more reason to believe than to disbelieve.

What is more, ancient sceptics are not mere pieces of antiquity. The Pyrrhonians are repeatedly referred to by both believers in knowledge as well as the sceptics in contemporary philosophy. For instance, Roderick M. Chisholm in different editions of his *Theory of Knowledge*²⁰, mentions Sextus Empiricus several times both

in the way of a discussion of scepticism, preliminary to his epistemological theory and also for the analysis of epistemic concepts, for example, “counterbalanced”, “perceptual relativity”, etc. We may also cite the work of Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Skepticism*.²¹ This book argues for a sceptical thesis within a broad framework of ancient scepticism. It has two main conclusions: Pyrrhonian moral scepticism – we should suspend judgment on the question whether any moral beliefs are *epistemically* justified and moderate moral scepticism – moral beliefs can be “moderately justified” but not “extremely justified”. Sinnott-Armstrong suggests a number of ways one might gain modest justification to believe some moral propositions. Sinnott-Armstrong calls the conjunction of these claims moderate Pyrrhonian scepticism.

We have chosen just two instances; there are many more. This shows that ancient sceptics still keep the contemporary philosophers engage in their theses.

While doubt in modern scepticism is called philosophical doubt or “hyperbolic doubt” *a la* Descartes, ancient scepticism was practical doubt, and it was straightforwardly incompatible with any prospect of rational action, that is, action based on justifiably held reasons. That claim appears extravagant and as barely coherent to the modern mind. Philosophical doubt does not affect action. The modern sceptic has generally recognized that man must act to survive and thrive in the world – that we humans find ourselves placed in an environment which will not satisfy our needs, want and desires automatically, without the intervention of activity on our part. David Hume has put the point as follows:

But a Pyrrhonian... must acknowledge, if he will acknowledge anything, that all human life must perish, were his principles universally and steadily to prevail.

All discourse, all action would immediately cease; and men remain in total lethargy, till the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence ... Nature is always too strong for principle.²²

Hume's remark is irrelevant for modern sceptic's insulated doubt and marks the seriousness of the ancient variety.

II

In the history of scepticism a new phase began with the philosophy of René Descartes. In Descartes we have the emphasis on scepticism as a method. We must mention the distinction between the sceptical position and the sceptical method or the method of doubt. For a genuine sceptic, sceptical doubts destroy the validity of experience or reason, if he would not resort to other ways of knowing (including revelation, faith, intuition) as a way out of his sceptical doubt. He has no intention to retrieve or reconstruct what is destroyed by his sceptical doubt. But when the method of doubt is applied by Augustine or Descartes, there are positive reconstructive ends in view. Descartes' systematic exercise of doubt is a method, designed to clear out the rubble of preconceived opinions, often based on unreliable sources or unscrutinized presuppositions. From the testimony of senses to the fundamental truths of mathematics nothing is exempted from the snare of doubt. Descartes presents his scepticism in the form of sceptical hypothesis – in the form of a malicious power that deceives our senses and undermines the justification of knowledge otherwise accepted as justified. At the end of the first *Meditation*, he writes, "I will suppose ... that some evil demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies to deceive

me”²³. Descartes saw scepticism as disease of epidemic magnitude: his whole philosophical activity was given to the search for a cure.

It is well known that Descartes’ scepticism or method of doubt was initial. He was searching after certainty. It has been observed, “Before Descartes there had been Skeptics, but who were only Skeptics. Descartes taught his age the art of making skepticism give birth to Certainty”.²⁴ The torrents of doubt are checked by the rock of certainty encountered at the start of the second *Meditation*. The meditator’s indubitable knowledge of his own existence as a thinking being: I am thinking, therefore, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by the self. This is Descartes’ Archimedean point on which he proposes to build a new and reliable system of knowledge observing that the proposition was so firm and sure that all the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptic were incapable of shaking it²⁵.

At the stage we must re-emphasize the distinction that has so often been made, the distinction, namely, between scepticism as a theory of justification and the method of doubt. Though Descartes is regarded as advancing the classical form of sceptical argument in *Meditation*, Book I, it is rightly pointed out that the doubt is but a methodological preliminary. He takes his doubt through a series of successively more radical theses and hypotheses, ranging from the ancient sceptical contentions about the fallibility of the senses through the life-but-a-dream argument to the hypothesis of the deceitful demon that unfailingly misleads us into accepting error for knowledge. However, the scepticism induced by illusions, dreams and demons is only the initial chapter in Descartes’ philosophy. His main aim and interest does not end at this negative stage but, looks beyond it to the foundation of a rational program of positive cognition to which scepticism is but a methodological preliminary²⁶. The argument

that Descartes considers will establish at best a very weak form of scepticism, viz., the thesis that no belief about the external world is indubitably certain. As Bernard Williams shows, Descartes is here engaged, not in any ordinary search for the truth, but in a 'pure enquiry', abstracted from all exigencies of limited time and practical needs, where nothing matters except maximizing the ratio of true to false beliefs²⁷. And to accomplish this task Descartes himself provisionally plays the role of a sceptic and doubts everything.

Descartes' method of doubt generated fresh sceptical tendencies which can be called anti-Cartesian. We may mention the names of Gassendi, and Pierre Bayle. Gassendi tried to reject the Cartesian resolution of scepticism by questioning whether Descartes' criterion could determine what was true or false. Anything that appears as clear and distinct to us may not really be clear and distinct. Gassendi pointed out that for all anyone could ascertain, the whole Cartesian system of truths might be only a subjective vision in somebody's mind and not a true picture of reality. Gassendi had challenged whether the Cartesian criterion could ever be successfully applied. But, Bayle went even further and challenged whether it was even the criterion of knowledge. He showed that the human effort to comprehend the world in rational terms always ended in perplexities, bewilderment and insoluble difficulties²⁸.

Exactly one hundred years since Descartes wrote *Meditations* in 1641, David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* was published in 1740. It is a devastating criticism of eighteenth century mentality that believes in the truth and progress of science and benefits to the progress of humanity. Hume was not satisfied with the euphoric intellectual atmosphere of the 18th century. His analysis revealed scepticism about man's ability to gain knowledge about anything beyond the immediately

obvious or demonstrable relationships of ideas. Hume showed that no truths about matters of fact could be established deductively or inductively. He once pointed out that inductive reasoning is inclusive, since its evidential value rests upon the assumption that nature is uniform, that the future will resemble the past. This assumption cannot itself be justified. Hume's version of scepticism centered the sceptical attack on the issues that were to dominate subsequent philosophy – the problems of induction, causality, external existence, nature of the self, and the proofs of the existence of God. He showed what was actually involved in the Pyrrhonian statement that the sceptic accepts beliefs by habit and custom and according to nature²⁹, since, for him, “Nature, by an absolute and uncontrollable necessity has determined us to judge as well as to breathe and feel.”³⁰

Hume's scepticism was developed in Germany in the second half of the 18th century culminating in the critical philosophy of Kant, who famously said that Hume's scepticism roused him from his dogmatic slumber. Sceptical puzzlings worried Kant. He held that the sceptical method was an indispensable propaedeutic to critical dogmatism. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, there are as many as fourteen places where Kant significantly talked of scepticism. At one place, he said:

... the sceptic is ... the taskmaster who constrains the dogmatic response to develop a sound critique of the understanding and reason ... While... the skeptical procedure cannot of itself yield any *satisfying* answer to the question of reason, nonetheless it *prepares the way* by arousing reason to circumspection, and by indicating

the radical measures which are adequate to secure it in its legitimate possessions.³¹

Kant saw that Hume had fundamentally challenged the Enlightenment and hoped that all sceptical disputes could be settled by what Locke had called “the physiology of the understanding,” and that the question: “How is knowledge possible?” had to be reexamined. Kant’s solution can be considered as an attempt to establish a middle ground incorporating complete scepticism about metaphysical knowledge and a conviction that universal and necessarily certain knowledge existed as the conditions of all possible experience. He assumed that knowledge is possible, and hence total scepticism is false.³²

In the 20th century sceptical thinkers like Fritz Mauthner, George Santayana, Albert Camus and quasi-sceptical figure like Hans Vaihinger are the central figures. Mauthner, in the early part of the century, developed a type of scepticism from his work on the analysis of language. He contends that each language expresses a *Weltanschauung*, and what is considered as true in a language is always relative to this outlook. His critique of language led him into complete scepticism. Scepticism was offered by George Santayana, especially in his *Scepticism and Animal Faith*.³³ Santayana insisted that “nothing given exists as it is given,” and all our beliefs about what is given are open to question³⁴. Santayana writes:

I have imitated the Greek sceptics in calling doubtful everything that, in spite of common sense, any one can possibly doubt. But since life and even discussion forces me to break away from a complete scepticism, I have determined not to do so surreptitiously nor at

random, ignominiously taking cover now behind one prejudice and now behind another. Instead, I have frankly taken nature by the hand, accepting as a rule in my farthest speculations the animal faith I live by from day to day.³⁵

This is a strain of thought similar to Hume who has no reservation in urging us to live by a life of commonsense and practicality. But Santayana clearly differs from Hume in making an attempt to introduce a metaphysics of matter, essence, spirit, and truth of his own. Another form of 20th century scepticism is that of such existentialist thinkers as Albert Camus. In the *Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus portrays man as trying to measure the nature and meaning of an essentially absurd universe by means of questionable rational and scientific criteria. Camus regards the sceptical arguments used by Kierkegaard as showing the contradictory nature of human rational attempts to understand the world as decisive, but he rejects Kierkegaard's fideistic³⁶ solution, overcoming the sceptical crisis by "a leap into faith."³⁷

Scepticism is basically a methodological doctrine. But it can also be a way of life – the sceptic way of life. The sceptic will have no theoretical beliefs as far as philosophical argument is concerned. However, scepticism may be a philosophical position itself which is marked by the attitude not to accept the vain pretensions of the dogmatists. The main bulk of his argument is directed against such specific and identifiable targets. The question is what the sceptic is going to gain out of his

18 DEC 2012

241130



perennial doubting. He is not succumbing to uncritical acceptance of knowledge claims. Dick Garner says:

The skeptic... will be engaged in a continuing (and perpetually unresolved) search for a definitive answer to each and every philosophical question that comes before him. He will (and Sextus did) amass a large stock of philosophical arguments of varying degrees of strength and plausibility, from which he may draw to support any side of each philosophical question. Sextus called these arguments 'Tropes'.³⁸

The quietude of the sceptic is only so-called. It may be compared to the peace of the well-armed man, always on guard and ready for combat, though with a reasonable expectation neither of victory nor defeat. It is not in the least like the quietude of the man for whom, in the words of Wittgenstein, "philosophical problems... *completely* disappear"³⁹. This is what makes the sceptic important for philosophy.

III

There are many references to sceptics (ajñānikaḥ) scattered throughout Indian literature but there is very little surviving philosophical scepticism. Indian position on scepticism is found in such systematic and basic Sanskrit texts as – Nāgārjuna's *Mādhyamikākarikā* and Jayarāsi Bhaṭṭa's *Tattvopaplavasimha*.⁴⁰ Sriharśa's *Khaṇḍankhaṇḍakhādyā* is an important text in the history of Indian dialectics and scepticism. They represent three different philosophic traditions of India. The first is a Madhyāmika Buddhist, the second was either a materialist or an agnostic, the third

was an Advaita Vedāntin. As has been observed by B.K. Matilal, in spite of these differences, they shared a common style of philosophizing as well as a common attitude towards the discovery of truth, "... to be in the same way critical, skeptical, refutative and destructive".⁴¹ Professor Matilal has also mentioned Sañjaya who "questioned the knowledge claims of other *Śramaṇas* and *Brāhmaṇas* regarding certain moral, religious and metaphysical matters. Typical questions asked in those days "... were: 'Is there a soul?' 'Is there an after-life?' and 'What is right and what is wrong?' Sañjaya and his followers argued that it is impossible to *know* correct answers to such questions."⁴²

We intend to add a note on Nāgārjuna's scepticism in which the key argument is the negation of 'intrinsic nature' of things. In the section on *Āryasatyā Parīkṣā* of *Mādhyamikakārikā*, Nāgārjuna explores the crucial ideas of *śūnyatā*, *pratītyasamutpāda* and *madhyamā pratipad*. All things being void, there is neither a thing to be negated nor a negation. Things are naturally 'void of an intrinsic nature' (*svabhāvaśūnya*), being 'dependently originated' (*pratītyasamutpanna*). In other words, it has merely a therapeutic value. Nāgārjuna neither denies the world nor affirms it. We can only speak of a relational way of becoming. His is a middle path. He says:

yah pratītyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatām tām pracakṣmahe|

*sā prājñāptir upādāya pratipat saiva madhyamā||*⁴³

We call that whatever is dependent origination or relational origination *śūnyatā* or voidness. It is a mere designation based on something and it is the middle way.

Negation of the 'intrinsic nature', with Nāgārjuna, is thus designated for dissipating the error of people who see an 'intrinsic nature' in the things while they

have none. According to Nāgārjuna, if voidness, that is, becoming is denied then the world itself is assumed to be the absolute, not born, not destroyed, immutable, free from the manifold states of its becoming:

*ajātam aniruddham ca kūtastham ca bhaviṣyati |
vicitrābhir avasthāvhiḥ svabhāve rahitam jagat||⁴⁴*

From the standpoint of self-existence, the world will be removed from the various conditions and it will be non-destructive, non-originative and immovable.

Nāgārjuna has to face the objection that if all things are void, how can our activities in the world become possible? This objection, Nāgārjuna says, springs from a fundamental misunderstanding of “voidness”, that is, “dependent origination”. All our activities are possible in the relational world of becoming. When “voidness” is denied there is nothing to be done, no work is undertaken; the agent does not do any work. He says:

*na kartavyam bhavet kiṃcid anārabhā bhavet kriyā |
kāraḥ syād akurvāṇaḥ śūnyatām pratibādhatāḥ||⁴⁵*

For one who destroys *śūnyatā* it will be like a doer without an action, a non-activating or with nothing to act upon.

The problem of assigning a kind of dialectic to Nāgārjuna is not easy. His logical disputations reduce all assertions to the category of ultimate absurdity. He has no ‘position’ to defend. His position in fact is ‘non-position’. The best way for him to refute his opponents’ criticism is to show the contradictions inherent in the latter’s way of thought. He is a *prāsaṅgika*, not a *svātantrikā* – he does not show any predilection for independent inference.

Thinkers like Jayarāśi and Sriharśa are regarded as sceptics because they question the validity of cognition by questioning the faultlessness of the conditioning factors. Jayarāśi Bhaṭṭa adopts the technique of opposition without the establishment of any theory. His methodological approach is called *vitaṇḍā* in *Tattvopaplavasimha*. He criticizes the Nyāya theory of perception as *indriyārtha sannikarṣotpannam jñānam avyapadeśyam avyabhichāri vyavasāyātmakam pratyakṣam*,⁴⁶ on the ground that the appropriateness of the conditions such as *avyābhicāritva*, *vyavasāyātmakatva* and “sense-object-contact” (*indriyayarthā sannikarṣo*) can be known or can be coherently explain. He also criticizes the Nyāya theory of inference on the ground that the relation of invariable concomitance between *hetu* and *sādhya* (*vyāpti*) cannot be ascertained. He also refutes the Buddhist theory of perception as *avisambādakam* and Buddhist theory of inference based on *tādatmya* relation.

Even though Jayarāśi and Sriharśa differed in their metaphysical presupposition. Sriharśa’s refutation of justifiability of all definitions of valid cognition have basic similarity with Jayarāśi’s argument. What they agree upon is that there is a gap between the knowledge claims and the grounds of making these claims.⁴⁷ If knowledge is aimed at delivering truth then, all possibility of doubt should be eliminated. The problem is that this demand cannot be made. The sceptic’s is a “commitmentless denial” or *prasajya pratishedhaḥ*. His negation is not a logical argument, but a refutation which is compatible with non-asserting the thesis of one’s own. Such an attitude is clearly expressed in Nāgārjuna’s declaration *nāsti ca mama pratijñā*.⁴⁸

IV

In this section we consider it worthwhile to briefly dwell upon some influential figures in recent discussion and debate on the problem of radical scepticism, those who are deeply suspicious that any intellectually satisfactory solution could ever be given to this problem.⁴⁹ The roots of this movement in the contemporary literature can be traced back to the works of three main figures Peter Unger⁵⁰, Barry Stroud⁵¹ and Thomas Nagel⁵². In his early works⁵³ Unger argued that scepticism arises because ‘knowledge’ is an abstract term like of flat or empty. According to Unger, what is interesting about abstract terms is that they are never really satisfied, although we often talk as if they are. What the sceptic is responding to in his argument is the fact that strictly speaking nothing is ever really known, because to be *really* known the agent would have to rule out every possibility of error, and this is an impossible hurdle to clear at least for finite beings like us. So, although we speak of knowing lots of things, reflection indicates to us that our claims to knowledge are in fact, false.

Both Nagel and Stroud thought that there is something in our philosophical quest for objectivity that inexorably leads us to sceptical conclusions. Nagel argues, for instance, that objectivity involves attaining a completely impartial view of reality, one that is perspective-independent, that is, not tainted by any particular perspective. We aspire, he contends, to “get outside of ourselves”, and thereby achieve the impossible task of being able to “view the world from nowhere from within it”.⁵⁴ We realize that the initial appearances present to a viewpoint can be unreliable guides to reality and therefore seek to modify our ‘subjective’ view with a more objective perspective that is tempered by reason and reflection. As Nagel points out, however,

the trouble with this approach is as under:

...if initial appearances are not in themselves reliable guides to reality, [then] why should the products of detached reflection be any different? Why aren't they... equally doubtful...? ...The same ideas that make the pursuit of objectivity seem necessary for knowledge makes both objectivity and knowledge seem, on reflection, unattainable.⁵⁵

Stroud makes similar claims. He writes:

The skeptical philosopher's conception of our position and of his quest for an understanding of it ... is a quest for an objective or detached understanding and explanation of the position we are objectivity in. What is seen to be true from a detached 'external' standpoint might not correspond to what we take to be the truth about our position when we consider it 'internally', from within the practical context which gives our words their social point. Philosophical skepticism says the two do not correspond; we never know anything about the world around us, although we say or imply that we do hundreds of times a day... I think that the source of the philosophical problem of the external world lies somewhere within just such a conception of an objective world or in our desire, expression in terms of that conception, to gain a certain kind of understanding

of our relation to the world. But in trying to describe that conception I think I have relied on nothing... but just the general idea of what an objective world or objective world of affairs would be.⁵⁶

According to Stroud, if the general idea of objectivity does indeed express the conception of the world and relation to it that the sceptical philosophers relies on then scepticism can be avoided only if that conception is rejected. And we may note that if responding to scepticism involves denying “platitudes that we all accept”, then it follows that any adequate response to the problem of radical scepticism is bound to be intellectually unsatisfactory.

In this chapter we have made a general survey of scepticism from the ancients to the moderns, emphasizing its perennial relevance for philosophy. Needless to say, our moral ambitions also are not immune from the tentacles of scepticism. The seeds of moral scepticism are traceable in the writings of Sextus Empiricus. We have not attended to the problem of scepticism in relation to morality. This we intend to take up in the next chapter.

CHAPTER I

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. R.G. Burry, *Sextus Empiricus: Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1, London: Loeb Classical Library, 1949, p. xxix.
2. Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, revised by Henry Stuart Jones, 9th ed. London: OUP, 1948, pp. 1606 – 1607.
3. Richard H. Popkin, ‘Skepticism’ in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 7, p. 449.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 449 – 450.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 450.
9. Richard H. Popkin. *The History of Skepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*, London: University of California Press, 1979, pp. xiii – xiv.
10. The Greek word “*dogma*” is equivalent to “teachings” or “doctrines” but also includes in its definition the notion of “tenets” or principles. R.J. Hankison, *The Sceptics*, New York: Routledge, 1995, p.318, n. 2.
11. Charles Landerman and Robin Meek, eds., *Philosophical Skepticism*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2003, p. 37.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
13. Julia Annas and Junathan Barnes, *The Modes of Scepticism*, Cambridge: CUP, 1985, pp. 21-22.
14. R.G. Burry, *Sextus Empiricus: Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1, London: Loeb Classical Library, 1949, para 173.

15. R.G. Burry, *op. cit*, p.25.
16. Quoted in Chung-Ying Cheng, "Nature and Foundation of Skepticism in Chinese Philosophy," *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. XXVII, 2, 1977, p.138.
17. *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Bk. II, Sec. 188.
18. Julia Annas and Jonathan Annas, *The Modes of Scepticism*, *op. cit*, p. 6.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
20. R.M. Chisholm, *Perceiving: A Philosophical Study*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1957.

_____, *Theory of Knowledge*, second edition, , New Delhi: Prentice-Hall of India Private Limited, 1977.

_____, *Theory of Knowledge*, third edition, New Delhi: Prentice-Hall of India Private Limited, 1992.
21. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Skepticism*, Oxford: OUP, 2006.
22. David Hume. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Sec. XII, part ii.
23. John Cottingham. trans., *Meditations on First Philosophy*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 37.
24. L'Abbé François Para du Phanjas, 1779, cited in Richard H. Popkin , *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*, University of California Press, London: Berkeley Los Angeles, 1979, p. 172.
25. P.J. Olscamp. *Discourse on Method*, trans., Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965. Part IV, p. 32.
26. Descartes had an ideal of certainty – clearness and distinctness. He considers the adventitious ideas the least certain of all ideas because they do not satisfy this criterion.

27. Bernard Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978, pp.37-47.
28. Richard H. Popkin, *op. cit.*, pp. 454 – 455.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 455-456.
30. David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, part 4, Sec.1.
31. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith, London: Macmillan, 1973, A769/B797, p. 613.
32. Richard H. Popkin, *op. cit.*, pp. 456-457.
33. George Santayana, *Scepticism and Animal Faith*, New York, 1923; reprinted, New York: Dover Publication Inc., 1955, p.308.
34. Richard H. Popkin, *op. cit.*, p.107.
35. George Santayana, *op.cit.*
36. The Fideist is one who (a) believes in God, (b) thinks everyone should believe in God, yet (c) believes that there is no objective basis for the truth of the proposition "God exists". The fideist would hold a normative belief in God, yet also be a meta-religious sceptic.
37. Richard H. Popkin, *op. cit.*, p.459.
38. Dick Garner, "Skepticism, Ordinary Language and Zen Buddhism" in *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. XXVII, No. 2, 1977, p.167.
39. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation*, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1968, 1:133.

40. Nyāya is usually taken as a non-skeptical epistemological position, but if one cares to read between the lines it would be evident that the Nyāya concerns with the definition of *vyāpti* presupposes the sceptic's doubts about the efficacy of one's awareness of *vyāpti* to validate inferences. The Nyāya thinker is a skeptic at heart inasmuch as he takes care not to allow the sceptic to get the upper hand. The Nyāya thinker may appear to refute sceptical doubts concerning *vyāpti* advanced by Jayarsi Bhaṭṭa, yet somewhere the Nyāya thinker admits sceptical logic of the sceptic as valid and shows, as in the *Vyāptipañcaka*, that no definitive definition of *vyāpti* could be available. The definitions proposed are all tentative, and are all ad hoc devices to carry on our pragmatic dealings. But theoretic considerations, if honest, shall have to admit that no satisfactory account of *vyāpti* could be given for once and for all. It is one thing to say that an awareness of *vyāpti* is necessary, but it is totally different thing to give a theoretically adequate account of it. The latter case is what the skeptic advocates, and the Nyāya thinker demonstrate this by his over-cautiousness with the notion of *vyāpti*.
41. Bimal Krishna Matilal , "Skepticism and Mysticism" in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 105, No.3, Indological Studies Dedicated to Daniel H.H. Ingalls, Jul.-Sep., 1985, p.480.
42. *Ibid.*
43. *Mūlamadhyamakakārika*, trans.. Kenneth K. Inada. Delhi. Sri Satguru Publications. 1993, XXIV, 18, p. 148. Also, the *Dialectical Method of Nāgārjuna. Vīgrahavyābartanī*, trans. & eds., K. Bhattacharya, E.H. Johnston and Arnold Kunst, Delhi, Matilal Banarasidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1998.
44. *Mūlamadhyamakakārika*, *op. cit.*, XXIV, 38, p. 152.
45. *Mūlamadhyamakakārika*, *op. cit.*, XXIV, 37, p. 152.
46. *Nyāyasūtra*, ed., Ganganath Jha, Poona, 1939, 1.1.4.

47. Dilip Kumar Mohanta, *Cognitive Scepticism and Indian Philosophy*, Calcutta: Punthipustak, 1989, p. 111.
48. *Vigraha-Vyavartani*, 29, trans., K. Bhatta, Delhi: Motilal Banarasi Das, 1986, p. 61.
49. From [http:// www.Lep.utm.edu/skepcont](http://www.Lep.utm.edu/skepcont). *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
50. Peter Unger, "A Defense Skepticism", *Philosophical Review*, Vol. 80, 1971, pp. 198-219. Also, his book, *Ignorance – A Case for Skepticism*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.
51. Barry Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism*, Oxford: OUP, 1984. Also his "Understanding Human Knowledge in General", *Knowledge and Scepticism*, eds., M. Clay & K. Lehrer, Coloradr, Boulder: West view, 1989.
52. Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, Oxford: OUP, 1986.
53. Peter Unger, "A Defense of Skepticism", *op. cit.* Also, *Ignorance: A Case for Scepticism, op. cit.*
54. Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere, op. cit.*, p.76.
55. *Ibid.*
56. Barry Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism, op. cit.*