

Scepticism and the Emergence of Intellectual Orientations in the History of Western and African Philosophical Traditions

IBIYEMI, Sheriff Olasunkanmi

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5290-5835>

Department of Philosophy

Lagos State University, Ojo, Lagos

sheriff.ibiyemi@lasu.edu.ng

ONIPEDE, Gabriel Tunde

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8320-5455>

Department of General Studies

Federal University of Allied Health Sciences

Enugu, Nigeria. moscoagora@gmail.com

Abstract

Scepticism is an aspect of Epistemology which is the life force of Philosophy, yet many are led to the belief that this radical field does no good to human search for the ultimate reality. This paper argues that everyone is a sceptic even if they do not recognise this fact. It is also revealed here that the history of philosophy is the history of scepticism. The moment Thales expressed doubts whether the Gods can be the source of the Universe and its laws and then opted for water, reveals the beginning of the sceptical challenge that still bestrides philosophy till posterity. It is hereby maintained that Scepticism is the prime factor among many others for the development of a new schools of thought in Philosophy. This work exposes the development of German Idealism from Kant's sceptical conclusions. It also shows the birth of Marxism from the scepticism Karl Marx raised about Hegel's grounding of reality in the Absolute Spirit. The Neo-Idealists raised brows that led to a positive philosophy in the 20th century, called Logical Positivism. The formulation of Husserlian phenomenology from Cartesian 'cogito' is uncovered as the sceptical challenge of the ability to think critically on the part of Africans led to African Philosophy. It is here concluded that Scepticism is an aspect of philosophy which rouses man from his dogmatic slumber.

Keywords: African Philosophy, History of Thought, Phenomenology, Scepticism, Western Philosophy.

Introduction

Scepticism is one of the fields in epistemology whose contributions to the growth and development of knowledge cannot be de-emphasized. In fact, it could be said that without the sceptical approach to life and issues, progress and development towards a higher and better state of affairs may be elusive. This is why the central aim of this essay is to give an expository analysis of the roles played by scepticism in the development of philosophies that shall be the concern of this essay which are the German Idealism, Marxism, the Logical positivism, Phenomenology, and the African philosophical tradition.

It would be inappropriate to commence this exercise without giving due assessment to the idea of scepticism, its nature and how it has fared from times past. For the sake of convenience and comprehension, this essay has been divided into four parts, the first being this introduction. The second division of this essay gives a very brief historical account of the origin, meaning, nature and development of scepticism. Some notable sceptics may be highlighted during this discourse. The third part of this essay gives a critical account of the contributions of scepticism to the growth of knowledge and mankind as a whole. Here, the work exposes the roles scepticism played in the development of philosophic movements. The fourth section summarises and concludes the work.

Scepticism – Origin, Meaning, Nature and Development

Scepticism is a term derived from the Greek word 'skeptomai' which literally means to think, to look about, to consider etc. Over time, the term has come to mean a studied attitude of questioning and doubt; the doctrine that absolute knowledge is not possible (Omeregbe;1999). In the words of Michael Huemer (2001:xix) Scepticisms "is the position that it is impossible to know about anything about the external world at all". Scepticism is one of the tools of philosophising as it erodes all barricades of dogmatism in a systematic manner. It takes nothing for granted and always seeks to question the basis of all our common-sense assumptions. This characteristic feature of scepticism is second to none.

There are usually two variants of scepticism: absolute scepticism and limited scepticism. The one, being the most extreme and the other also known as external world scepticism; the former claims nobody knows anything at all while the latter claims nobody knows anything about the external world (the world outside of one's own mind) (Huemer;2002:507). These forms of scepticism have been employed overtime by sceptics.

Scepticism, it could be said, is as old as philosophy itself. Since philosophy is born out of doubt and wonder, it is not surprising therefore to note that scepticism accompanies man wherever he goes. No one can even deny that they have never employed the sceptical attitude to matters of the world. Chronicling the humble origin of philosophy vis-à-vis human existence evinces the implication that doubt was an undeniable factor in this regard. Omeregbe opines that:

To reflect on such questions in search of explanations or answers is to philosophize. There is no part of the world where men never reflect on such basic questions about the human person or about the physical universe. In other words, there is no part of the world where men do not philosophize. The tendency to reflect on such fundamental philosophic questions

is part of human nature; it is rooted in man's natural instinct of curiosity – the instinct to know (1985:4).

It is therefore important to note from here that scepticism is part of man. But at what point did scepticism become an academic discipline? What and who made scepticism a branch of epistemology which also comprises empiricism, idealism? Responding to this question, Anthony Kenny informs us that:

The founder of Scepticism was Pyrrho of Elis, a soldier in Alexander's army, who was an older contemporary of Epicurus. Pyrrho taught that nothing could be known and, consistently with that view, wrote no books; but his teaching was brought to Athens in the early years of the third century by his pupils Timon and Arcesilaus. Timon denied the possibility of finding any self-evident principles to serve as the foundation of sciences: and in the absence of such axioms, all lines of reasoning must be either circular or endless (2006:58).

But this is not to say scepticism had not been present in ancient Greece before this era. The sophists are usually credited as the anticipators of academic scepticism. The sophists were itinerant teachers who taught their philosophy in exchange for money, an occurrence that had hitherto been foreign to teaching philosophy (Sprague;1972) (Omorgebe;1999a). Prominent names among these sophists are Protagoras of Abderas, Georgias, Antiphon, Hippias, Prodicus, and Thrasumachus. It is the doubt raised by these sophists that challenged Plato and Aristotle. The former had established his *Academy*, with the sole aim of studying the Forms. Capra (1975:58) notes, in this connection that:

The gate of Plato's Academy in Athens is said to have borne the inscription, 'You are not allowed to enter here, unless you know geometry.' The Greeks believed that their mathematical theorems were expressions of eternal and exact truths about the real world, and that geometrical shapes were manifestations of absolute beauty. Geometry was considered to be the perfect combination of logic and beauty and was thus believed to be of divine origin. Hence Plato's dictum, 'God is a geometer.' Since geometry was seen as the revelation of God, it was obvious to the Greeks that the heavens should exhibit perfect geometrical shapes.

It is not surprising therefore, that the philosophy of Plato culminated into dogmatism and it was in his very *Academy* that scepticism found root. This is echoed in the words of Anthony Kenny thus "Arcesilaus became head of the Platonic *Academy* about 273 and turned its attention from the later dogmatic works of Plato to their earlier Socratic dialogues. He himself, like Socrates, used to demolish theses put forward by his pupils; the proper attitude for the philosopher was to suspend judgment on all important topics" (Anthony;2006:98). It was under the administration of Arcesilaus that scepticism as an

academic enterprise blossomed. Since the concern of this work is not to give an account of the development of scepticism in the Hellenistic era, it shall now concern itself with the task of informing how scepticism has been relevant, not only in philosophy but other fields of human endeavour as well.

Scepticism has been employed by philosophers and scholars in other fields of human endeavour to question the basis of the structure of some knowledge claims. Some prominent names that are synonymous with scepticism directly or indirectly in their philosophies and method are: Rene Descartes, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, I.T. Oakley and many others.

Scepticism - Ground for the Development of Schools of Thoughts.

What and how has scepticism contributed to the growth and advancement in human knowledge over the centuries? It may be argued that we often fail to realize the usefulness of scepticism as most people dislike critical assessments of their belief systems. This has engendered some distance from scepticism, but is it really possible for man to totally avoid scepticism? This appears to be what Michael Huemer had in mind, when he informed us that:

Often students fail to see the value in studying skepticism, partly because it seems like such an outlandish and radical thesis. Indeed, very few epistemologists endorse skepticism. Yet the discussion of philosophical skepticism occupies a highly prominent place in the epistemological literature. Why is this? Briefly, the reason is because of the theoretical interest of the arguments for philosophical skepticism. Philosophical skeptics frequently appear able to start from plausible, commonly held assumptions about the nature of knowledge and deduce from these assumptions that we really know little or nothing. Non-skeptical philosophers then face the task of identifying the mistake in these otherwise plausible assumptions (2002:507).

Philosophers are usually quick to see how relevant scepticism is, to our thoughts, ideas and how they eventually develop. For Hegel (1995), the sophists were subjectivist whose sceptical reaction to the objective dogmatism of the pre-Socratics was synthesized in the work of Plato and Aristotle. This implies that for Hegel, sophism and eventually scepticism is the backdrop upon which Plato and Aristotle founded their thoughts. George Grote (1904), in a similar vein informs that the sophists were progressive thinkers who placed in question the prevailing morality of their time. Even in the last century, Jacques Derrida (1981) had suggested there is an affinity between sophism and postmodernism.

At this junction, here is to investigate the role of the intellectual exercise played in the development of some selected schools of thought. To show how German Idealism was birthed as a result of the sceptical conclusion of Immanuel Kant. The sceptical connection between Hegelianism and Marxism. Also, how scepticism played a great role in the diffusion of Husserlian phenomenology from Cartesian methodic doubt. The essay also evinces the connection between Idealism in 20th century and how it generated logical positivism. The essay suggests the development of African Philosophy from the scepticism of the Eurocentrism.

a. Immanuel Kant and German Idealism: Immanuel Kant is a German philosopher. He lived all his life in Königsberg, his home town. It is said that at university, he was more interested in the Leibnizian metaphysics, as codified into a system by Wolff; he became disenchanted with it after reading Hume and Rousseau” (Anthony;2006:275).

Kant believes that human reason is supposed to understand the nature and limits of its power. He further argues that human knowledge arises from the combination of sensibility and understanding. Through the senses objects are given to us; through the understanding, they are made thinkable. The structure of our senses determines the content of our experience, the constitution of our understanding determines its structure. Kant therefore invites the philosophy to critically engage sensibility and understanding. He calls the former study ‘the transcendental aesthetic’ and the latter ‘transcendental logic’ (Anthony;2006:278).

Reason, Kant argues, works on the ideas given it by the senses. This is contra what earlier writers on the subject had missed – that human reason works on the ideas perceived by the senses. Earlier scholars had maintained the mind is passive, but Kant changed this passivity to activity. For instance, a man who sees white naturally from birth cannot be convinced that mango leaves are actually green. This impossibility Kant informs us derives from the fact that the mind brings its own interpretative category on things (Unah;2004). From this assertion, Kant reveals that man can only know things as they appear but not how they really are. This is the distinction between the *phenomena* and the *noumena*.

Therefore — and here is the crucial move — it is *contradictory* to try to extend the use of our concepts to describe not just the phenomena but *also* the “things-in-themselves.” It is contradictory to suppose that the phenomena are accurate *representations* of things-in-

themselves. Things-in-themselves are whatever they are with no special reference to us; phenomena, on the other hand, *necessarily* involve a reference (even if only an implicit one) to ourselves (Spade;1996:21).

Hence, Kant remained sceptical and elusive to the possibility of knowing things as they really are in themselves. Reality, the noumena is forever closed off to reason, and reason is limited to the awareness of understanding its own subjective products. Kant speaks thus "reason has no other purpose than to prescribe its own formal rule for the extension of its empirical employment, and not any extension beyond all limits of empirical employment" (Kant, 1965:630). Even Jacobi, one of the assessors of Kant on the latter's distinction between *phenomena* and *noumena*, is said to have concluded that "...Kant's critical philosophy cannot be saved from scepticism and subjective idealism" (Dudley;2008:50). Jacobi informs that attempting to save Kant's philosophy which is laden with the charge of scepticism is impossible "unless you give an alien meaning to every word...For according to the common use of language, we must mean by 'object' a thing that would *be present outside us in a transcendental sense*. And how could we come by any such thing in Kantian philosophy?" (Jacobi;1994:338).

It is the talk about an unknowable *noumenon*, which actually led to the development of German Idealism. What is the connection between Kant's sceptical conclusion regarding the real apprehension of the *noumenon*, the thing-in-itself, and the reality which is the cause of what we perceive using sensibility and understanding? This may be answered when we turn attention to Gottlieb Fichte.

Gottlieb Fichte's major work is *Wissenschaftslehre* which he published in 1804. Fichte had been a keen admirer of Immanuel Kant. Just like F.H. Jacobi had noted above, Fichte came to the conclusion that Kant's philosophy contained a radical inconsistency. Kant didn't give up the notion that our experience was ultimately caused by 'things-in-themselves' even though we could know nothing about such things. This is the point of connexion between the two as for Gottlieb Fichte, the concept of cause was something which could only be applied within the sphere of phenomena. How could there be an unknown, mind-independent cause outside this sphere? (Anthony;2006:298).

Hence, it is in the *Wissenschaftslehre*, that Fichte tried to redesign Kant's system in order to remove the inconsistency. Two ways were possible. One would be to allow the notion of cause to extend beyond the realm of phenomena, and allow experience to be caused by things-in-themselves. This, for Fichte is the Path of dogmatism. The other would

be to abandon the thing-in-itself, and to say that experience is created by the thinking subject. This is the Path of Idealism.

Fichte, starting with the Ego or pure self, set himself the task of showing how the whole of consciousness could be derived from it. His various explanations of this derivation failed to make clear, either to his admirers or to his critics, that he was not claiming that the individual self could create the whole material world. But he insisted that he was talking not of an individual self, but of a single, absolute ego, which created all phenomena and all individual selves (Anthony;2008:299). Fichte believes that philosophy is a science which must be based on a fundamental proposition which is undemonstrable and self-evidently true. This fundamental proposition is that the ego affirms its own being (Omogbe;1999b). Hence, Fichte builds his philosophy on the ego and thus German Idealism as a philosophic enterprise was birthed.

b. Hegelianism and Marxism

The philosophy of G.W.F Hegel led to two bifurcations or schools, one of which employed the sceptical method. The 'Absolute Spirit' philosophy of Hegel led to the Right wing Hegelians and Left Wing Hegelians (Stumpf;1979). The former school consolidated on the thoughts of Hegel as the latter school was sceptical about the idealism of Hegel. The prominent member of the latter school is Karl Marx.

Marx specifically believes that Hegel stood the world on its head, with the latter's idealistic project. Marx was sceptical if humans can get to the truth of reality from the idealism of Hegel. The Young Hegelians in general alongside Marx, rejected the idea of the Absolut Spirit (Anthony;2006:304). Marx's expression of his scepticism and discontent with the philosophy of Hegel led him to translate the latter's dialectical idealism into dialectical materialism, from which he was able to give a historical account of how societies have evolved over time.

It is not difficult again to see how the sceptical approach to matters of human existence guides the transformation of dialectical idealism to dialectical materialism and then later on historical materialism.

c. The Cartesian 'Methodic Doubt' and Husserlian Phenomenology

The sceptical method employed by Rene Descartes, seem to have a base or foundation for the Phenomenology, which Husserl birthed from the former. In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, we observe six meditations employing the methodic doubt to distrust things we

commonsensically bungle up as knowledge. Descartes in his own words announced in the *First Meditations* that “today I have expressly rid my mind of all worries and arranged for myself a clear stretch of free time. I am here quite alone, and at last I will devote myself sincerely and without reservation to the general demolition of my opinions” (Descartes;1996). Thus, Descartes begins the process of doubting and arrived at the conclusion that he exists. In other words, during the process of doubting everything that he ever came across or thought to be knowledge, he discovered that he was actually thinking all along. Hence, to doubt is to think and to think is *to be*, i.e. to exist. Descartes arrives at the dictum “I doubt, I think, therefore I am”.

The skeptical challenge that Edmund Husserl, the father of phenomenology discovered is found in the very skeptical method that Descartes was using during his methodic doubt. Husserl came to the realization that Rene Descartes failed to take cognizance of the fact that human thought is always an intention about something, and consciousness is always involved.

Husserl is convinced that what we call reality consists of objects and events (phenomena) as they are perceived or understood in human consciousness, and not of anything independent of human consciousness. Husserl believes that we can ‘bracket’ (phenomenological epoche) sensory data and deal only with the ‘intentional content’ (the mind’s built-in mental description of external reality), which allows us to perceive aspects of the real world outside.

The role scepticism plays in this scheme is that Husserl believes that Descartes’ had remained too true to the original sceptical impetus and not radical enough in his overthrow. In other words, what this passage is saying is that for Phenomenology was birthed as a result of the fact that Descartes does not concede to intentionality and consciousness, which he takes for granted.

d. Scepticism, Neo-Idealism and Logical Positivism

The early parts of the 20th century witnessed resurgence in idealism at Cambridge. Scholars such as McTaggart countered the possibility of having time as we normally construe it. Their whole philosophy is based on the presupposition that things exist because they are mind-dependent. Scepticism was another motivation for G.E. Moore as there was beginning to be doubts about an external world on the one hand and the

Cambridge idealists were denying the existence of things, claiming perceptual objects are all mind-dependent

G.E. Moore was fortunate to have been among the gatherings of these scholars and this prompted to write two essays both aimed at responding to the idealists and the sceptics and in the end engendering logical positivism which hangs on indirect realism. Moore refutes them with his 'Proof of an External World'. Here, Moore tried to debunk the assertions of mind-dependence for things to exist as well as proving an external world. In his own words, Moore avers that:

I can prove now, for instance, that two human hands exist. How? By holding up my two hands, and saying, as I make a certain gesture with the right hand, "Here is one hand," and adding, as I make a certain gesture with the left, "and here is another." And if, by doing this, I have proved ipso facto the existence of external things, you will all see that I can also do it now in numbers of other ways: there is no need to multiply examples (1939: 119).

Moore (1925) had earlier written about the need to use our common sense to assert the reality of objects and perceptual knowledge. Here, he attempted to refute the scepticism of the idealists on the nonexistence of the external world on the grounds that some of our beliefs are absolutely certain. It was the sceptical attitude to the unreality of time and similar related topics from the sceptics and idealists, which engendered thoughts on the need to demarcate science from non-science or pseudo-science. The metaphysics of the neo-idealists seem to be a danger to the language of science and thus the Logical Positivism was birthed with an intention of purging science from metaphysics. They called for the total destruction of metaphysics. Prominent names here are Carnap, Russell, Wittgenstein, Schlick, Heinmann etc.

Here again, we notice how scepticism birthed another philosophical school in Logical positivism through the scepticism of the neo-idealists.

e. Scepticism and African Philosophy

Literatures around two or three centuries ago had circulated regarding the status of the 'man of colour' (Fanon;2008) whether he be a human or a beast. This is not only true for Africa but for the native Indians of America as well. On the case of the latter, Eduardo Galeano informs that:

Voltaire's Latin America was inhabited by Indians who were lazy and stupid, pigs with navels on their backs, and bald and cowardly lions. Bacon, De Maistre, Montesquieu, Hume, and

Bodin declined to recognize the “degraded men” of the New World as fellow humans. Hegel spoke of Latin America’s physical and spiritual impotence and said the Indians died when Europe merely breathed on them (1997:41).

This is the case for the Negro as well. Several anthropologists and philosophers such as Claude Levy-Bruhl, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Friedrich Hegel, were sceptical about the ability of the Negro to think critically or make a civilization. In the case of Africa, Hegel notes “Africa is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit...Egypt...does not belong to the African spirit” (Hegel;1956:99). This view of the Hegelian philosophy of history has become almost a common opinion and an academic paradigm in Western historiography. It implies that “a great culture or civilization cannot be produced by African (Black) people” (Obenga;2004:32).

After independence, it became necessary for African scholars to repudiate this claim and several researches in the attempt to respond to the sceptical challenge of the Western Eurocentric scholars led to the emergence of African Philosophy which is now recognised all over the world. Indeed, the Africans are now recognised as humans who can birth a culture and steer civilization.

This section has thus far, being able to enlighten us on the subject matter of how scepticism provided a challenge for other fields of human endeavour to be birthed and to have a unique philosophy. This is usually in response to the inadequacies of a previous system.

Conclusion

It is no longer to be taken for granted that beneath every rebellion and repudiation of a philosophic system lays scepticism. The nature of scepticism, the need to always question the basis of every assumption is paramount for a new philosophic school to develop. This paper was able to demonstrate with Western and African orientations in the history of philosophy, the sceptical underpinnings that led to the formulation of the thoughts therein. It was shown here how the sceptical conclusions of Immanuel Kant led to the development of German Idealism which then led to Marxism. In the 20th century, this paper exposes the factors that engendered the rise of Logical Positivism and Phenomenology and African Philosophy. It was shown how the Neo-Idealists had inspired scepticism which initiated the Vienna Circle and how the sceptical challenge of the possibility whether Africans can be originators of culture and civilization birthed African Philosophy. The ‘methodic doubt’ initiated by Rene Descartes emerges to affirm the existence of self, constituted a

background to understanding the development of Husserlian phenomenology. It may be gleaned from all of the above that the inspiration of scepticism is one of the tools that man is endowed with. It is this tool that informs social change. A man not satisfied with a state of affairs had already exercised doubts as to the authenticity of that state. Thales, usually recognised as the first philosopher, for instance was sceptical about the Olympian gods and whether these can be the source of morality. Instead of positing that the basic constitutive element of the universe is Poseidon, he opted for water and thus Philosophy as we know it today begins through the sceptical challenge that Thales threw at mankind.

References

- Anthony, K., (2006) *An Illustrated Brief History of Western Philosophy*, New York, Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Capra, F., (1975) *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism*, Colorado, Shambhala Publications, Inc.
- Derrida, J., (1981) *Dissemination*, trans B. Johnson, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Descartes, R., (1996) *Meditations on First Philosophy*, J. Cottingham (trans and ed), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Dudley, W., (2008) *Understanding German Idealism*, Stocksfield, Acumen Publishing Limited.
- Galeano, E., (1997) *Open Vein of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*, trans C. Belfrage, New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Grote, G., (1904) *A History of Greece* vol. 7., London, John Murray.
- Fanon, F., (2008) *Black Skin White Mask*, London, Pluto Press.
- Hegel, G.W.F., (1995) *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans E.S. Haldane, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press (original work published 1840).
- Hegel, G.W.F., (1956) *The Philosophy of History*, New York, Dover.
- Huemer, M., (2002) (ed.) *Epistemology: Contemporary Readings*, London, Routledge.
- Huemer, M., (2001) *Scepticism and the Veil of Perception*, Maryland, Rowman and Littleman Publishing Inc.
- Jacobi, F.H., (1994) *Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza in Letters to Herr Moses Mendelssohn*, in G. di Giovanni (ed. and trans) *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*, Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Kant, I., (1965) *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans Norman Kemp Smith, New York, St. Martins Press.
- Moore, G.E., (1939) 'Proof of an External World', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 25.
- Moore, G.E., (1925) 'A Defence of Common Sense' in *Philosophical Papers*.
- Obenga, T., (2004) 'Egypt: Ancient History of African Philosophy' in K. Wiredu (ed.) *A Companion to African Philosophy*, New York Black well Publishing Ltd.
- Omeregbe, J.I., (1999a) *A Simplified History of Western Philosophy Vol. 1*, Lagos, JOJA Publishers.
- Omeregbe, J.I., (1999b) *A Simplified History of Western Philosophy*, Vol. 2, Lagos, JOJA Publishers.
- Omeregbe, J.I., (1985) 'African Philosophy: Yesterday and Today' in P. Bodunrin (ed.) *Philosophy in Africa: Trends and Perspectives*, Ile-Ife, University Press.
- Sprague, R., (1972) *The Older Sophists*, South Carolina, University of South Carolina Press.

Stumpf, S.E., (1979) *Elements of Philosophy: An Introduction*, New York, McGraw Hill Book Company.