

“A skeptic is one who is willing to question any knowledge claim, asking for clarity in definition, consistency in logic and adequacy of evidence” (adapted from Paul Kurtz, 1994). Evaluate this approach in two areas of knowledge.(Question #6)

Informational enhancements and increasing educational levels have brought about a revolution in the access and diffusion of knowledge in today globalized world. Every day, thanks to the endless amount of sources, a man living in our society is exposed to a unimaginable load of information. The claim *“A skeptic is one who is willing to question any knowledge claim, asking for clarity in definition, consistency in logic and adequacy of evidence”* raises evident issues with regards to the validity and consistency of knowledge in its various forms. The following essay is therefore directed to explore the circumstances under which knowledge may rely, delineating the role of the skeptic in the evolution of emerging and established knowledge. The previous will be pursued by focusing on the natural sciences and ethics as chief Areas of Knowledge (AoKs), whilst Perception, Reason and Emotion will cover a pivotal role within the analysis of the relevant Ways of Knowing (WoKs). When reflecting about the relation between AoKs and WoKs, it became suddenly clear that there was a tight interconnection between the two: for instance, deduction and induction are the roots of Reason, and more extensively they compose inductivism, the base of scientific method. Therefore, although the main focus is reserved to whether natural sciences and ethics require logic and evidence in order to acquire knowledge, WoKs will not be disregarded.

An epistemological definition of knowledge would consider everything that is a “ justified true belief ” (Plato)¹ as knowledge. If the noun “ belief ” pinpoints an individualistic access to the

¹ Graham Dawson, The Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. 31, No. 125 (Oct, 1981), pp. 315-329. Oxford university Press.
<http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/2219402?uid=3738032&uid=2&uid=4&sid=21103604510337>

nature of knowledge, the justification of the knowledge claims may lead to its own endorsement. This process has led a personal, true and justified belief to become common knowledge, and is famously named as the tripartite theory of knowledge².

However, a skeptic's approach may further question the validity of the arguments presented, not tolerating the persuasiveness of the justifications given. Opposing the tripartite theory, skeptics may argue that the belief in something does not necessarily justify an assertion of knowledge. This juxtaposes the theory of fundamentalism which establishes that some dogmas must be self-justified or beyond justification, without reference to others: only assuming such as true and universal it is possible to further prove other beliefs as knowledge. In fact, if such statements were to be negated, the entire debate on the validity of knowledge would be unquestionably worthless. In such a case, Socrates' "I know one thing: that I know nothing"³ represents the apotheosis of skepticism (or even cynicism), corresponding with the complete rejection of any type of belief. This premise serves the purpose of avoiding statements such as Descartes' "Argument from dreaming"⁴, whose focal scope is to doubt the existence of the external material world surrounding us, where the ways of knowing permanently lose any meaning.

Moving on from extreme skeptical standpoints, in the realm of natural sciences, skepticism can cover a vital role. This is vehemently embedded in the scientific method itself: given a 'puzzling' facet of reality, a reasonable hypothesis must be proposed in order to explain logically the

² J. L. Stocks, *Mind*, New Series, Vol. 24, No. 94 (2006), pp. 207-221. Published by: Oxford University Press URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/224919>

³ Christopher Rowe, *Phronesis*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (Aug., 1999), pp. 242-252. Published by: BRILL, URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4182621>

⁴ Douglas Odegard, *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 2, Studies on Descartes (Apr., 1995), pp. 155-164. Published by: University of Illinois Press, URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27744656>

phenomenon. The very next step is to devise experiments that will falsify the hypothesis, which is skepticism in practice, as further consistence and adequacy of knowledge are being questioned. It has been believed for two centuries that Newton's equations of motion could define the movement of every single moving object in the universe, regardless of the conditions and circumstances at which motion itself takes place. However, Einstein's skepticism led to the discovery of relativity, chiefly regarding objects moving close to the speed of light. If Einstein did not doubt about the established model that had always been adopted, the theory of Relativity would have never been completed. This outlines how a skeptical approach to a theory, whose validity had never been doubted previously, may lead to a progression of knowledge to a redefined level. In a broader context, the claim "Blind belief in authority is the greatest enemy of truth"⁵ (Einstein) embodies how the lack of a self-doubt, or conversely the total belief into some true and well-justified theory, will halt the progression of natural sciences: no hypothesis will be formulated and the nature of knowledge itself will remain unquestioned, therefore leading to a static form of knowing. The skeptic has therefore contributed to improve the validity of knowledge claims, throughout the application of logic, inquiring and researching deeper in either vaster or more specific scenarios.

Although the application of skepticism may seem to be beneficial to the verification and evolution of knowledge in the natural sciences, this is not always the case. This year, my brother was introduced to flying little airplanes. As he is not allowed to wear glasses during training, he was suggested a new type of contact lenses, which worn only at night, should guarantee a perfect eyesight for the rest of the day. I had been very doubtful about their actual effectiveness, and strongly impeded their purchase, preventing my brother from passing a medical exam regarding

⁵ Albert Einstein, *goodreads.com*, URL: <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/10610-blind-belief-in-authority-is-the-greatest-enemy-of-truth>

his physical suitability to fly. However, after several months, we were able to obtain a couple of trial lenses: to my great surprise, when we had another sight check up, he was not only able to see perfectly right after waking up, but even after a day. This situation illustrates how skepticism could actually be a hurdle, further procrastinating the recognition or validation of knowledge, as exposed in the case. In addition, it can be claimed that the knowledge arising from consolidated knowledge is much stronger to eradicate than emerging one, as the believer is naturally induced to accept his old knowledge as true, finding difficult to discard what he/she had thought to be a “justified true belief”, recalling the tripartite theory of knowledge. Hence, in the natural sciences skepticism represents the foundation of reasoning and progress, and it is strictly necessary to assess the validity of sources, however may represent an obstacle to overtake.

However, the aforementioned conclusion for the natural sciences may only be practicably achievable when indisputable objective evidence is presented. In fact, within the absence of rigorous information, there is no basis on which evaluate the knowledge assessing the consistency given. We just entered the Ethics. In this realm, is the evolution of knowledge still closely related to skepticism and self enquiries as in the natural sciences?

The study of Ethics explores the opinions and moral judgments of humans. Its scope is to assess which basis are required in order to produce an ethically correct observation. The word "euthanasia" was first used in a medical context by Francis Bacon in the 17th century, to refer to an easy, painless, happy death, during which it was a "physician's responsibility to alleviate the 'physical sufferings' of the body." ⁶ In 2005, Eluana Englaro, died in Italy after a physician

⁶wordpress.com, *Euthanasia – What is it?*, (2010) URL: <http://endoflifeissuesdebate.wordpress.com/tag/history-of-euthanasia/>

assisted suicide, which had been brought about by the willing of the father Peppino Englaro.⁷ After a car crash in 1992, she had remained in a vegetative coma for more than 20 years. The willing of the family was to end the young woman's life, however they were extensively criticized. In fact, there were skeptical approaches to the issues and public belief was divided. After a year of political discussion, a sentence emitted by the Cassation court in Milan, has given the ability of “ switching off ” Eluana's life to the family.⁸

The previous real life situation raises interesting questions about the utility of skeptical approaches given a moral issue. In fact, skepticism may halt human open-mindedness when generating own judgments. In this case, skepticism has ignored the family's willingness, in substitution with what has been imposed by the sentence of a jury: it has consequently limited the diffusion and application of knowledge by cultural constraints. Nonetheless, it may be argued that the family's decision, despite being justified and true, was just a more personal response to such a scenario, and therefore cannot be universally a true accepted knowledge. Thus, when claims are not assessed on the basis of universally and objective knowledge, but rather on personal standpoints, skepticism becomes a hurdle for free moral orientations, blurring which set of moral values should be the accepted as the truthful ones, given that in a general scenario there is no such thing as right and wrong.

In summary, it is inexorable that the role of the skeptic aids to frame and further progress models whose adequacy of evidence can be objectively addressed. This reflects the natural sciences in particular, where knowledge is considered on the basis of a inductive process, whose logic approach is unquestionable; the role of the skeptic is therefore beneficial to doubt about the form

⁷ Bbc.co.uk, *Italy man wins life support plea*, (13 November 2008), URL: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7728284.stm>

⁸ Ibidem

in which knowledge claims are presented, leading to a further clarity in definition, precision and validity of the knowledge. Nonetheless, in ethics, where the validity of knowledge claims is assessed on personal basis rather than universally accepted methods, such as inductivism, skepticism may encounter strong oppositions, as there is no framework used to evaluate whether the claim is right or wrong, since personal orientations vary with culture and education.

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