



The Sceptics

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Scepticism is a semi-technical term in philosophy, and means the doctrine which doubts or denies the possibility of knowledge. It is thus destructive of philosophy, since philosophy purports to be a form of knowledge. Scepticism appears and reappears at intervals in the history of thought. We have already met with it among the Sophists. When Gorgias said that, if anything exists, it cannot be known, this was a direct expression of the sceptical spirit. And the Protagorean “Man is the measure of all things” amounts to the same thing, for it implies that man can only know things as they appear to him, and not as they are in themselves. In modern times the most noted sceptic was David Hume, who attempted to show that the most fundamental categories of thought, such as substance and causality, are illusory, and thereby to undermine the fabric of knowledge. Subjectivism usually ends in scepticism. For knowledge is the relation of subject and object, and to lay exclusive emphasis upon one of its terms, the subject, ignoring the object, leads to the denial of the reality of everything except that which appears to the subject. This was so with the Sophists. And now we have the reappearance of a similar phenomenon. The Sceptics, of whom we are about to treat, made their appearance at about the same time as the Stoics and Epicureans. The subjective tendencies of these latter schools find their logical conclusion in the Sceptics. Scepticism makes its appearance usually, but not always, when the spiritual forces of a race are in decay. When its spiritual and intellectual impulses are spent, the spirit flags, grows weary, loses confidence, begins to doubt its power of finding truth; and the despair of truth is scepticism.

Pyrrho

The first to introduce a thorough-going scepticism among the Greeks was Pyrrho. He was born about 360 B.C., and was originally a painter. He took part in the Indian expedition of Alexander the Great. He left no writings, and we owe our knowledge of his thoughts chiefly to his disciple Timon of Phlius. His philosophy, in common with all post-Aristotelian systems, is purely practical in its outlook. Scepticism, the denial of knowledge, is not posited on account of its speculative interest, but only because Pyrrho sees in it the road to happiness, and the escape from the calamities of life.

The proper course of the sage, said Pyrrho, is to ask himself three questions. Firstly, he must ask what things are and how they are constituted; secondly, how we are related to these things; thirdly, what ought to be our attitude towards them. As to what things are, we can only answer that we know nothing. We only know how things appear to us, but of their inner substance we are ignorant. The same thing appears differently to different people, and therefore it is impossible to know which opinion is right. The diversity of opinion among the wise, as well as among the vulgar, proves this. To every assertion the contradictory assertion can be opposed with equally good grounds, and whatever my opinion, the contrary opinion is believed by

somebody else who is quite as clever and competent to judge as I am. Opinion we may have, but certainty and knowledge are impossible. Hence our attitude to things (the third question), ought to be complete suspense of judgment. We can be certain of nothing, not even of the most trivial assertions. Therefore we ought never to make any positive statements on any subject. And the Pyrrhonists were careful to import an element of doubt even into the most trifling assertions which they might make in the course of their daily life. They did not say, "it is so," but "it seems so," or "it appears so to me." Every observation would be prefixed with a "perhaps," or "it may be."

This absence of certainty applies as much to practical as to theoretical matters. Nothing is in itself true or false. It only appears so. In the same way, nothing is in itself good or evil. It is only opinion, custom, law, which makes it so. When the sage realizes this, he will cease to prefer one course of action to another, and the result will be apathy, "*ataraxia*." All action is the result of preference, and preference is the belief that one thing is better than another. If I go to the north, it is because, for one reason or another, I believe that it is better than going to the south. Suppress this belief, learn that the one is not in reality better than the other, but only appears so, and one would go in no direction at all. Complete suppression of opinion would mean complete suppression of action, and it was at this that Pyrrho aimed. To have no opinions was the sceptical maxim, because in practice it meant apathy, total quietism. All action is founded on belief, and all belief is delusion, hence the absence of all activity is the ideal of the sage. In this apathy he will renounce all desires, for desire is the opinion that one thing is better than another. He will live in complete repose, in undisturbed tranquillity of soul, free from all delusions. Unhappiness is the result of not attaining what one desires, or of losing it when attained. The wise man, being free from desires, is free from unhappiness. He knows that, though men struggle and fight for what they desire, vainly supposing some things better than others, such activity is but a futile struggle about nothing, for all things are equally indifferent, and nothing matters. Between health and sickness, life and death, difference there is none. Yet in so far as the sage is compelled to act, he will follow probability, opinion, custom, and law, but without any belief in the essential validity or truth of these criteria.

The New Academy

The scepticism founded by Pyrrho soon became extinct, but an essentially similar doctrine began to be taught in the school of Plato. After the death of Plato, the Academy continued, under various leaders, to follow in the path marked out by the founder. But, under the leadership of Arcesilaus, scepticism was introduced into the school, and from that time, therefore, it is usually known as the New Academy, for though its historical continuity as a school was not broken, its essential character underwent change. What especially characterized the New Academy was its fierce opposition to the Stoics, whom its members attacked as the chief dogmatists of the time. Dogmatism, for us, usually means making assertions without proper grounds. But since scepticism regards all assertions as equally ill-grounded, the holding of any positive opinion whatever is by it regarded as dogmatism. The Stoics were the most powerful, influential, and forceful of all those who at that time held any positive philosophical opinions. Hence they were singled out for attack by the New Academy as the greatest of dogmatists. Arcesilaus attacked especially their doctrine of the criterion of truth. The striking conviction which, according to the Stoics, accompanies truth, equally accompanies error. There is no criterion of truth, either in sense or in reason. "I am certain of nothing," said Arcesilaus; "I am not even certain that I am certain of nothing."

But the Academics did not draw from their scepticism, as Pyrrho had done, the full logical

conclusion as regards action. Men, they thought, must act. And, although certainty and knowledge are impossible, probability is a sufficient guide for action.

Carneades is usually considered the greatest of the Academic Sceptics. Yet he added nothing essentially new to their conclusions. He appears, however, to have been a man of singularly acute and powerful mind, whose destructive criticism acted like a battering-ram not only upon Stoicism, but upon all established philosophies. As examples of his thoughts may be mentioned the two following. Firstly, nothing can ever be proved. For the conclusion must be proved by premises, which in turn require proof, and so *ad infinitum*. Secondly, it is impossible to know whether our ideas of an object are true, i.e., whether they resemble the object, because we cannot compare our idea with the object itself. To do so would involve getting outside our own minds. We know nothing of the object except our idea of it, and therefore we cannot compare the original and the copy, since we can see only the copy.

Later Scepticism

After a period of obliteration, Scepticism again revived in the Academy. Of this last phase of Greek scepticism, Aenesidemus, a contemporary of Cicero, is the earliest example, and later we have the well-known names of Simplicius and Sextus Empiricus. The distinctive character of later scepticism is its return to the position of Pyrrho. The New Academy, in its eagerness to overthrow the Stoic dogmatism, had fallen into a dogmatism of its own. If the Stoics dogmatically asserted, the Academics equally dogmatically denied. But wisdom lies neither in assertion nor denial, but in doubt. Hence the later Sceptics returned to the attitude of complete suspense of judgment. Moreover, the Academics had allowed the possibility of probable knowledge. And even this is now regarded as dogmatism. Aenesidemus was the author of the ten well-known arguments to show the impossibility of knowledge. They contain in reality, not ten, but only two or three distinct ideas, several being merely different expressions of the same line of reasoning. They are as follows. (1) The feelings and perceptions of all living beings differ. (2) Men have physical and mental differences, which make things appear different to them. (3) The different senses give different {367} impressions of things. (4) Our perceptions depend on our physical and intellectual conditions at the time of perception. (5) Things appear different in different positions, and at different distances. (6) Perception is never direct, but always through a medium. For example, we see things through the air. (7) Things appear different according to variations in their quantity, colour, motion, and temperature. (8) A thing impresses us differently when it is familiar and when it is unfamiliar. (9) All supposed knowledge is predication. All predicates give us only the relation of things to other things or to ourselves; they never tell us what the thing in itself is. (10) The opinions and customs of men are different in different countries.

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