

Summary

The History of Skepticism. In Search of Consistency

The book is devoted to the reconstruction of the history of the idea of philosophical skepticism from ancient to present time. It is also an attempt to present the recent state of research in the field of both history of philosophical skepticism (recent interpretations) and epistemology of skepticism (recent discussions and opinions). The thesis of the book is that the basic problem for the skeptical position throughout history is the problem of inconsistency (self-refutation). Since antiquity skeptics were forced to answer to this charge, they invented many ways to avoid it. But the result was either not effective or too costly. Sextus Empiricus took his own words as the description of his feelings without any assertion. However, his skepticism is not a thesis at all and it cannot be accepted as true. Hume weakened the assertion for all beliefs and for his skeptical thesis. Such view in contemporary vocabulary is fallibilism rather than skepticism. In contemporary philosophy the skeptical thesis *No one ever knows anything about anything* or *No one is ever justified in believing anything* is treated as a clear paradox.

The main result of the book is the thesis that skeptical inconsistency is a pragmatic inconsistency. It is not a logical inconsistency, because there is no clear contradiction here. Pragmatic inconsistency is also a contradiction between two propositions, but only one of them is overtly stated; the second is tacitly presupposed in the act of assertion of the skeptical thesis. When skeptics assert *No one ever knows anything about anything* they presuppose that they have some reasonable ground for such assertion. In one act of assertion the skeptics both claim that no reasonable ground for assertion is possible and presuppose that this one assertion has such reasonable ground. Pragmatic inconsistency is not falsification: no one knows which contradictory element is false. The skeptical thesis can still be true but it cannot be consistently and reasonably accepted and asserted.

The book consists of five chapters. The first one “The concept and varieties of skepticism” starts by presenting the genealogy of the term *skeptikoi* which is later than the skeptical movement and was invented at Aenesidemus’ school around the first century AD. In Cicero’s *Academica*

term *academics* is used instead of *skeptics*. Secondly, the evolution of the concept of skepticism is presented. In antiquity the sceptical position was to suspend all judgments (*epochē*). In medieval times skepticism was connected with the understanding that omnipotent God can deceive us. In modern times skepticism was not the attitude of suspending judgments but the attitude of doubting their value (natural beliefs were treated as unavoidable). In contemporary times skepticism is neither the attitude of suspending, nor the attitude of doubting but the abstract thesis; its global variety is clearly self-refuting. Philosophical sense of *skepticism* is not the only one. Common understanding of *skepticism* is usually local and consists of denying some popular view. The most important is religious skepticism that is close to atheism. Philosophical skepticism is more global and often it was rather questioning than denying. The object of philosophical doubt can be knowledge, justification or meaning. It can also concern ethical knowledge, religious knowledge and other fields. The most important in the history of philosophy was global skepticism questioning all knowledge or at least all knowledge about external world. This kind of skepticism is the main subject of this book and it is this kind of skepticism that is charged with inconsistency. Contemporary skepticism as a thesis (there is no knowledge) is well separated from fallibilism (there is no certain knowledge) but closer to agnosticism (the world is unknowable).

The second chapter is devoted to ancient skepticism, especially by Pyrrho, Arcesilaus, Carneades, Aenesidemus, Agrippa and Sextus Empiricus. All of them struggled with the charge of inconsistency. Carneades is reported that he refused to assert that “Nothing is apprehensible” because of the contradiction. To answer the *apraxia* charge he distinguished the level of practice and the level of theory and formulated the theory of subjective probability (credibility). His *approval of what is credible* for practical purposes can be interpreted as weak assertion. Sextus Empiricus considered Carneades’ view as the betrayal of skepticism. He rejected approval of probable judgments and recommended life without belief, following appearances and customs. Writing his books he gathered a lot of arguments against reliability of senses, criterion of truth or validity of proofs. But he wrote that he did not assert anything. There are many new readings of Sextus texts that defend the consistency of his view but for high price. They present skepticism as behaviorism and irrationalism. In my view Sextus is rationalist but his view is inconsistent. Contemporary vocabulary (language games and speech acts theories) helps to understand Sextan inconsistency as pragmatic inconsistency. The content of Sextan speech acts

is inconsistent with their tacit presuppositions about the world and human cognitive capacities.

Christian thinkers thought about Sextan skepticism as unreasonable but sometimes they accepted Carneades' moderate skepticism reported by Cicero. St. Augustine claims that skeptical thesis *Knowledge does not exist* is inconsistent and morally damaging. He presented many examples of knowledge as counterexample towards skepticism, among others mathematical knowledge and knowledge about one's own existence. Specific medieval skepticism appeared in XIV century by understanding the consequences of Divine omnipotence (William Ockham and his followers). Nicholas of Autrecourt was the most radical medieval skeptic who questioned our knowledge about the existence of external objects, causal connections and God's existence and nature. But he accepted probable knowledge in these areas and certain knowledge about principle of non-contradiction (and what is guaranteed by it). Such local skepticism was free of the inconsistency charge.

The fourth chapter is devoted to modern skepticism (Montaigne, Descartes, Hume, Kant, Nietzsche and others). Montaigne officially accepted Sextan skepticism and tried to answer the inconsistency charge by replacing the declarative sentence with questions. In practice he chose the Carneades' way of moderating skepticism and was a ciceronian skeptic. Descartes and Kant were only methodical skeptics. Hume was moved by Cartesian hypotheses (dreaming and evil demon) but evaluated global skepticism as inconsistent. He took the academic way of moderate skepticism: he weakened the assertion towards the skeptical thesis and all other theses. Additionally he considered skepticism not as self-sufficient view but a part of general process of acquiring knowledge. Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, described skepticism as inconsistent but useful in the human history.

Chapter fifth concerns the contemporary discussions about skepticism. Recent skeptical arguments were deepened by reflection on language and mind. There are two kinds of contemporary skepticism: the Cartesian one connected with the hypothesis of brain-in-a-vat and the meaning skepticism connected with Kripke's hypothesis of *quus*.

Contemporary Cartesian skepticism, as thesis that *No one ever knows anything about anything*, is a kind of paradox. Such skepticism was declared by Peter Unger. It presupposes the strong concept of knowledge, requiring certainty and excluding all possible error, while common knowledge has softer standards and probable knowledge is commonly accepted. The recent discussion on Cartesian skepticism is huge. There are several strategies changing skeptical concepts and presuppositions. The first strategy is to

claim that knowledge does not require certainty. The second strategy is to claim that knowledge does not obey the logical rules. The third strategy is to claim that we can know without knowing that we know. The fourth strategy is to claim that standards for knowledge change from context to context. The fifth strategy is to allow default justification and to require reason for doubting. The sixth strategy is to reject the brain-in-a-vat hypothesis as inconsistent or false. All these strategies undermine the skeptical concept of knowledge or justification but cannot falsify the skeptical thesis, even if it is pragmatically inconsistent.

The new kind of skepticism is the meaning skepticism as thesis that no meaning exists (Kripke-Wittgenstein). This kind of skepticism is based on Kripke's *quus* hypothesis and suggests that the content of our beliefs and the meaning of our words are undetermined. However, the thesis that *Meanings do not exist* is paradoxical and self-refuting like the thesis that *No one ever knows anything about anything*. One cannot accept the first as justified and assert the second as definite. Pragmatic inconsistency allows saying that such a thesis can be true but it cannot be consistently asserted as a reasonable view with particular content. Its spoken content is contradictory to the unspoken presupposed content of the act of its assertion.

The consistent forms of moderate skepticism are fallibilism (no certain knowledge exists) and methodic skepticism (the attitude of caution in asserting theses). They are obvious views today but they lost philosophical importance. Global skeptical thesis is inconsistent but it was very important for philosophy and for the development of human knowledge.