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Scepticism as a constructive philosophical approach.
(Historical background – main theses - contemporary examples.)[1]

If sceptics did not exist,

then serious epistemologists

would have to invent them.

(L. BonJour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*,
Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1985, s. 14-
15)

I.

Introductory remarks.

I would like to invite you to take part in a discussion about some forms of scepticism in contemporary philosophy which seem to me not only very interesting, but also very much right. I will ask you to look at scepticism in general as a positive, constructive approach. This runs contrary to many present-day opinions that it is close to philosophical nihilism or radical relativism. It opens up many possibilities in epistemology (to resolve old problems of obtaining *episteme* knowledge for example) and yet does not lead us to metaphysical dogmatism (which is probably even more important).

In order to present such a account I will take three steps. Firstly I will have a brief look at some points of the history of scepticism which will help us to have clearer view of it as an interesting philosophical approach. In the second step I am going to give an exact description of scepticism as I see it. To do that I will follow the reasoning of Thomas Nagel taken from his excellent book *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford 1986) which has inspired me to begin the research into this area of

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[1] This article originated as a paper entitled *Scepticism as a constructive philosophical approach exemplified by two contemporary views: Paul Horwich's deflationism and Bruno Latour's actor network theory* and was delivered at Universität Rostock on 27th of June 2002 together with Krzysztof Abriszewski.

philosophy. The last step is to present some selected extracts from Paul Horwich's theory of truth to illustrate the possible forms of scepticism as I see them. There is no possibility of presenting them in detail and there is in fact no such need. I will rather point out some essential features of the theory, those which make it interesting to me. I hope it will let us to participate in an interesting discussion no matter what kind of philosophical attitude one has.

II.

1. Scepticism from a historical perspective.

I hope that all those who are experts in ancient philosophy and the history of philosophy will forgive me the very basic remarks here. I will find it necessary however to mention some matters in order to distinguish different forms of scepticism and to show their historical background. Historically speaking the English word 'scepticism' as well as the Polish word 'sceptycyzm' come from the Greek word 'skĕpsis' which can be translated as 'doubt, investigation, consideration'. So, when you are calling someone 'skeptikoi' – to use the Greek word – you are referring to somebody who refuses to take any dogmatic position and claims that he is always engaged in 'considering' and 'investigating' the matters. There are two basic forms of scepticism which can be detected among the ancient schools of thought. Firstly *radical scepticism* taken by Pyrrho of Elis (c. 360-c.270bc) and secondly *moderate scepticism* taken by Arkesilaos (c.315-c.240bc) and Karneades (c.213-c.129bc), pupils from Plato's Academy.[2] They all accept the thesis that there cannot be something like certain knowledge (*episteme*) about reality, other minds etc., but they draw quite different philosophical conclusions from this. According to Pyrrho we should not claim to be able to obtain real knowledge about things. We should rather suspend all judgements[3]. According to the scepticism of the Academy, although we can never be certain whether we have knowledge and although there is no adequate justification for our epistemological claims nevertheless we can agree that it is probable that some of

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[2] Labels for scepticism are arbitrary used here. There are plenty of various ways of classifying scepticism as such. See for example M. Williams, *Skepticism*, in: J. Greco, E. Sosa (eds.), *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, Oxford: Blackwell 1999, p. 35-69.

[3] Pyrrho's proposal consists of four steps: *epoché* (suspending a proposition), *akatalepsĭa* (the lack of understanding), *aphasĭa* (silence), *ataraxĭa* (calm); and it was rather an ethical attitude than theoretical approach.

our beliefs are true (or could be true) and hence reliable. We should not call it knowledge in the sense of *episteme*. From what has been said above we can also derive two different forms of scepticism [4] *global* and *local* scepticism, which are very widely discussed in the philosophical literature. For my purposes it is enough to say that the first one is a scepticism regarding knowledge in general (see Pyrrho's ideas), whereas the second is a scepticism just regarding some particular area of knowledge.

Let me now make a long jump from antiquity to the seventeenth century and concentrate for a while on Descartes' approach so as to make my considerations concerning as such more clear.

The most famous questions which are usually numbered among sceptical questions are stated by Descartes in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*. We ask: 'How do I know I am really awake?', and 'Could the whole of reality be a dream?'[5]. They indeed sound sceptical because they challenge the things we take for granted in a broad sense. But are they such in fact? Let us look at them more closely. Descartes' approach is often called *methodological* scepticism. He starts from putting such questions and doubts as mentioned above in his method of reasoning and he even doubts that human senses can be a source of real, justifiable knowledge, but asking them is not his strategic aim. He is raising them in order to find a stable and unshakeable base on which to build well-grounded knowledge. He points at areas where we can look for such certainty, finally finding certainty in his own existence (as I) So, the method of Descartes is sceptical, but his philosophical attitude is certainly not. He writes in the *Meditations*:

The purpose of my arguments is not that they prove what they establish – that there really is a world and that human beings have bodies and so on – since no one has ever seriously doubted these things.[6]

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[4] See: T. Honderich (ed.), *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995, entry: scepticism.

[5] See: B. Stroud, *The Problem of the External World*, in: E. Sosa, J. Kim (eds.), *Epistemology. An Anthology*, Oxford: Blackwell 2000, p. 6-24.

[6] Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in: *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, edited and translated by E.S. Haldane and G.R.T. Ross, New York 1955.

As well know he finishes his pre-scientific work by constructing a very well grounded – as he believes – philosophical system with its famous metaphysical dualism of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. There is no room for scepticism there, so one can hardly call Descartes a sceptic in any real sense apart from a methodological one.

Let's make another long historical jump, which will let us see how the problem with scepticism is (not) solved in 20th century philosophy. We can distinguish three different approaches here exemplified in the work of certain philosophers. I will distinguish them according to the attitudes these philosophers take towards different forms of scepticism:

(i)   Refusal to accept any form of scepticism (especially a *global* one) with a serious attempt to give a proof of the external world to show that scepticism is wrong (George Moore).

(ii)   Refusal to accept a global form of scepticism by showing that the very formulation of the idea itself is wrong and even nonsensical (Ludwig Wittgenstein in his later work[7]).

(iii)   Acceptance of *moderate* scepticism with its all consequences after careful consideration (Barry Stroud, Peter Strawson, Peter Unger).

(iv)   Acceptance of certain kind of scepticism precisely defined for its own philosophical purpose. Scepticism is treated here as the only possible metaphysical view which can be accepted (Thomas Nagel).

Before I try to convince you that the fourth form of philosophical attitude towards scepticism is the right one, let us first have a quick look at the others.

Moore in his famous article *Proof of an External World*[8] gives us something which he called 'a perfectly rigorous proof' of the existence of things outside. As I said before, global scepticism consists in, among other things, a doubt about the existence of external world. In other words: we can never be sure if we are dreaming or not, so we are not sure that the world around us really exists. Moore's argument against global scepticism is very simple and let me add does not convince many philosophers. He assumes that a hand is a part of an external world. So, if there is a

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[7] I call it 'refusal' through a lack of any better notion. What Wittgenstein does to scepticism is something more and something different than refusal. He rather wants the philosophical problem of scepticism to disappear.

[8] In: G. E. Moore, *Philosophical Papers*, New York: Collier Books 1962, p. 144-148.

part of an external world, there must be an external world itself. So, all he has to do is to prove that something like a hand exists, hence he will prove the existence of the external world as well. According to Moore in order to prove the existence of human hands it is enough to make a certain gesture, that of holding up our two hands. Yet, the problem remains. Moore has proved that the external objects (our hands) exist, but now he has to prove that they existed in the past. He says:

I held up two hands above this desk not very long ago; therefore two hands existed not very long ago; therefore at least two external objects have existed at some time in the pas, QED[9].

Moore is very much aware of the fact that he cannot give a proof which would be something like a general statement as to how an proposition like 'The external world exists' may be proved (he does not believe such a proof can be given at all). He just has given a proof of the truth of some propositions concerning external things. It is not possible to prove that we are not dreaming, nevertheless we are very well aware that we are awake. This very awareness is based on faith and this seems to be enough to take it for granted and treat as real knowledge. There is an additional Moore's argument which is supposed to make Descartes' dreaming problem vanish. Let me quote what Moore calls 'the guilty of inconsistency':

Can anybody possibly know that dreams have occurred, if, at the time, he does not himself know that he is not dreaming? If he is dreaming, it may be that he is only dreaming that dreams have occurred; and, if he does not know that he is not dreaming, can he possibly know that he is not only dreaming that dreams have occurred? Can he possibly know therefore that dreams have occurred? I do not think he can.[10]

Moore's doubt is not that it is logically impossible that we are not dreaming at the moment, but he doubts that we could have both all sensory experiences and memories

[9] G. Moore, *Proof of an External World*, op. cit., p. 146.

[10] G. Moore, *Certainty*, in: *Philosophical Papers*, ed.cit., p. 242.

(that we do) and yet be dreaming. He thinks the last conjunction of propositions is self-contradictory[11].

Let me say a few words about Wittgenstein's strategy. It may be said that he rejects scepticism not by confronting it with a dogmatic metaphysical position, but rather with a different view of knowledge or obtaining knowledge. In this case scepticism is seen as an approach which simply cannot be formulated, for its formulation does not make sense. Why? Because it raises doubts where no questions can be asked. According to Wittgenstein, doubt and justification makes sense only within a certain system of rules (e.g. within certain language games) which determine the use of the expressions involved in them, and this is totally ignored both by scepticism and foundationalism. To call something 'knowledge' we do not need to treat it as unchangeable, absolute, independent from any language and immune to errors, as it is assumed in *global* scepticism. According to Strawson, Wittgenstein distinguishes two different kinds of elements in our belief-system:

which we actually treat as a matter for inquiry or doubt – and on the other hand – those elements which have a quite a different character, alluded to by the figures of scaffolding, framework. background, substratum, etc.[12]

These two elements build our knowledge-belief system and even if those propositions which belong to the second of them could not be proved, they would remain part of our knowledge on which we can rely[13]. In the last two paragraphs (675 and 676) of *On Certainty* Wittgenstein is trying to show that Descartes' dreaming-argument is based on certain ignorance of understanding the phrase 'to think, to have thoughts'. Namely, having thoughts is necessarily connected with being awake. One cannot think and sleep at the same time, because the possibility of the occurrence of thoughts

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[11] Ibid., p. 246.

[12] P.F. Strawson, *Scepticism, Naturalism and Transcendental Arguments*, in: E. Sosa, J., Kim (eds.), *Epistemology. An Anthology*, ed. cit., p. 38.

[13] See also: L. Wittgesntein, *Űber Gewißheit. Wekausgabe Band 8*, Frankfurt am Mian: Suhrkamp 1989, s. 113-259; English translation: *On Certainty*, translated by D. Paul, G.E.M., Anscombe, Oxford: Blackwell 1969.

is linked to the possibility of avowing them and this is not compatible with a state of sleeping[14].

There are some philosophers who accept scepticism in its *moderate* form after a careful search for arguments against it. Let me take Peter Unger's considerations as an illustration of such position. In his article *An Argument for Scepticism*[15] he analyses in detail something which he calls a conclusion of *universal* scepticism, that is: 'nobody ever *knows* that anything is so'. The very conclusion follows from two premises:

(1) If someone *knows* something to be so, then it is all right for the person to be absolutely *certain* that it is so.

(2) It is never all right for anyone to be absolutely *certain* that anything is so[16].

Unger claims that the first premise cannot be denied because it would violate the meaning of the phrase 'to know' and our general concept of knowledge. The correctness of the second premise comes from taking for granted the dogmatic feature that there is always something wrong with being absolutely certain[17]. To be absolutely certain about something entails to being not open at all to taking into account any new experience or relevant information which could possibly change the state of being certain in a given case. Unger prefers a more open-minded position, as he calls it. No matter how sure we can feel about our knowledge and about our philosophical theory, we cannot exclude the possibility that we could be possibly wrong. In Unger's view, dogmatism is the opposite of scepticism and it is the latter that he approves of[18].

2. Nagel's scepticism.

I very much hope that the short and quick run-through of some positions in the history of scepticism has given us a good starting point to show its constructive, useful and true elements. I will summarise what has been said through describing Thomas Nagel's scepticism, a position which seems right to me[19].

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[14] See: H-J. Glock *A Wittgenstein Dictionary*, Oxford: Blackwell 1996, p.340.

[15] In: E. Sosa, J. Kim (eds.), *Epistemology. An Anthology*, ed.cit., p. 42-52.

[16] Ibid., p. 42-43.

[17] Ibid., p. 44.

[18] Ibid., p. 52.

[19] I can also see positive aspects of Wittgenstein and Unger's position, but there is no enough space to discuss them here.

We have already seen that scepticism can be viewed as opposed to dogmatism, but there is another important relationship. Nagel claims that there is a certain relationship between scepticism and objectivism. They are both philosophical positions based on the idea that we belong to a real world and that all phenomena are created because of interactions between us and objects in the world. It means that we cannot accept phenomena in a non-critical way and we have to try to understand how we ourselves take part in creating them. In a way we cannot run away from ourselves. We cannot obtain a neutral position to investigate reality, so we have to doubt if we are getting closer to reality at all. We are supposed to build the conception of reality to which we belong, so it can be difficult (if at all possible) to include the conception of a subject (us) creating (in a sense) the reality in question. This very problem of achieving only a subjective ground for our knowledge can be, according to Nagel, faced with three types of reactions: *sceptical*, *reductive* and *heroic*[20]. The first and the last are of interest here. As we already know there is unbridgeable gap between truth conditions of our beliefs and verification conditions of our beliefs, as that they cannot be defended against serious doubts. If follows that they cannot treated in a serious, rational way. Heroic theories admit that there is the same abyss between the content of our beliefs about the world and their justification, but we can nevertheless jump over it. Such theories were stated by Plato, Descartes, Moore and many others to defend metaphysical realism. Nagel also wants to defend realism, but it seems to him that sceptical reaction is the correct one especially when we take our epistemological limits into account[21]. We should admit that our epistemological commitments are temporal and that we are not able to 'run away' from ourselves, but we should rather re-define our notion of knowledge. In looking for objective knowledge we can be always confronted with sceptical doubts which we are not able to refute. We cannot exclude the possibility that the world is totally different from the way it appears to us, but there is no way which could convince us that this is the case. We can and should try to achieve a complete conception of the world in which certain creatures capable of having a concept of the world really exist. Such a complete conception should

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[20] See: T. Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, Oxford 1986, chapter V.

[21] The notion of 'realism' is not easy to define and Nagel is very much aware of it. According to him basic claim of realism is the following: 'the external world exists and we do belong to it'. Such a view have to be completed with a conception of that world which can results in both: scepticism and objectivism. See: ibid.

explain how such creatures were able to form it. But still, such a self-transcendent theory would present just a possible view of the world and would not be immune to sceptical doubts. It would rather be a theory which could be true. Scepticism, as Nagel sees it, is the way of becoming aware of these facts, but is still does not force us to be happy with a merely subjective picture of the world.

3. Basic elements of Horwich's theory of truth[22].

Scepticism in its all forms is connected with an idea that when we want to achieve knowledge, we want to achieve real knowledge, in the old *episteme* sense of it. The connection is such that the sceptic doubts if such knowledge can be achieved because (among other things) a lack of absolute answers to the unavoidable question about the relationship between beliefs (propositions[23]) – which build our epistemological system – and the world. In other words, what makes beliefs (propositions) true. If the answer is that it is the world which makes them such, we still have to say how can we recognise that it does so (the problem of criteria). We are faced here with an old problem of formulating a theory of truth. I invite you to have a look at Horwich's minimal proposal concerning truth.

I find his theory a good example of a sceptical approach (in the *moderate* and Nagelian sense) for a number of reasons. Firstly, Horwich shares the following claim with other deflationists:

that the concept of truth is not metaphysically deep and does not require appeal to such notions as correspondence to reality, coherence, or success of one sort or another in coping[24].

It prevents him from accepting certain dogmatic metaphysical views, which by definition have to result in certainty in case of knowledge. Deflationism treats the notion of truth in a more moderate sense. Secondly, he illustrates how the truth predicate works using a very simple equivalence schema, without adding any

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[22] See his book *Truth*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1990.

[23] It is worth to add in advance that Horwich treats 'propositions' as truth-value beares.

[24] T. Honderich (ed.), *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. cit., p. 182. See also: *Truth, Deflationary Theories of*, in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, London: Routledge 1999.

substantial claims to it. This schema shows that the truth predicate is not especially complex. Let me make this schema a bit more familiar to you.

Horwich underlines the fact that no matter which theory of truth we - as philosophers - defend, we are ready to infer from the expression A: 'Snow is white', the expression B: 'The proposition that snow is white is true'. So observing how our language works we can make the following claim:

<Snow is white> is true iff snow is white

Similar claims will be valid for an endless class of propositions, so we can generalise and we obtain:

T-schema   *<p> is true iff p*

The simplicity (or even triviality) of the schema shows that the aim of Horwich's deflationism is not to give an answer to the general and substantial question *What is truth?* because we should not change our schema into an inflationistic schema of the form:

I-schema   *x is true iff x is Q*

Why not? Because it will always result with some metaphysically committed theories of truth and their problems, which will be impossible to solve. What is more with the I-schema we would have to define a truth-predicate employing some other expression (Q) with the same meaning and with special explanatory power which would leave (Q) unable to explain how x can be true. According to Horwich, we apply the truth-predicate according to the T-schema and in view of our epistemological limits we cannot decide what is that very something which makes a proposition true in every particular case. There is no such single thing or rather there are different things in a different cases which do so. It can be said that in minimal theories of truth it is not denied that in a sense truth corresponds to reality. When a certain proposition is true, it is such because of something in reality; something which is external to that proposition. Now, how we treat reality, how we understand the expressions which build that proposition and how we recognise that correspondence is accomplished are

all very complicated matters. A minimal theory of truth of Horwich's type is not going to answer them on its own grounds. The matter is closely connected with our epistemological capacities which are limited and open to errors. The last claim, as you may recognise, is compatible with Nagel's scepticism. There are claims which can be treated as quite solid grounds of our knowledge, grounds on which our knowledge is built (e.g. T-schema), but all the rest can only be obtained in a long and difficult search for objective knowledge; objective in Wittgenstein's or Nagel's sense, nor Plato's or Descartes' sense.

Following just these basic theses of minimal theory of truth. one can easily see that, as a theory, minimalism is open to a certain kind of epistemological pluralism. And pluralism is always seen as opposed to dogmatism and to metaphysically substantial views, and as such is of course on scepticism's side.