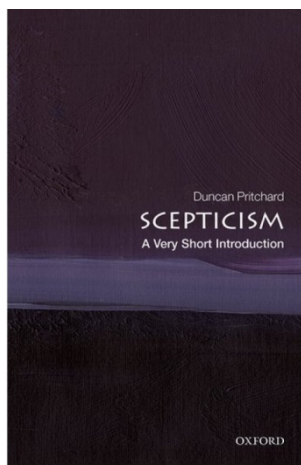


FRANCISCO ANGEL P. SOCRATES

A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION TO SCEPTICISM

Duncan PRITCHARD. *Scepticism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, 260 pp. ISBN: 978-0-19-882916-4.

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For those who studied in a university it is quite typical to have encountered, at least once, professors or even students—most likely of philosophy—who “question everything,” people who seem to have a knack and a certain propensity for challenging claims, either by spotting logical fallacies or by simply demanding justifications for them. Such people can at times be exasperating considering that it is generally discomfiting and humiliating to be made look “stupid”—this was probably one of the things that led to the death of Socrates—but it is even worse when someone made you realize how your most cherished beliefs, your fundamental assumptions about reality and existence are in fact wrong, or at least questionable.

Such an encounter can throw one into an existential crisis. Yet, in the long run, they can prove to be more beneficial than detrimental as they compel one to search for reasons to support his beliefs, or to look for other beliefs that are more reasonable and plausible. They can make one appreciate more the importance having of reasons for one’s knowledge and its relevance in everyday life. In any case, we appreciate such people for their commitment to the truth.

However, there is another kind of “questioner” (Q2) that is plainly annoying. This is the type of person who seem to find satisfaction in undermining the convictions of others, in showing people how their beliefs are actually unfounded, and how in fact we cannot know anything for sure. Moreover, he does this in the guise of having superior knowledge over the rest. Although it has some similarities with the first

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questioner (Q1) described above, this one is different because it does not open new paths for better knowledge, to the contrary it even closes the possibility of knowing anything altogether. This type of person is what we call today the “sceptic.”

Duncan Pritchard’s introduction to *Scepticism* is all about this. The author has two aims in the book, one is to give a comprehensive, though not exhaustive, account of the contemporary discussions on scepticism, particularly in the analytic tradition. It attempts to make the subject understandable, interesting, and less intimidating to a wider audience, especially to non-specialists, who may be interested. The other aim is to equip lay readers who are oftentimes defenseless against sceptical challenges with the necessary tools to deal with the sceptic, especially in seeing beyond its tricks. It is quite clear that Pritchard is particularly concerned with the way scepticism is being employed in current public discourse, such as the denial of climate change among science sceptics, and the proliferation of fake news and conspiracy theories in politics. Nevertheless, it is impressive that he is still able to present the sceptical position (in a broad sense) in its strong form.

Chapter 1 would probably be the most informative and interesting for a lay reader. Here, Pritchard outrightly criticizes the sceptical position. He begins by distinguishing two kinds of scepticism, one is *moderate* and the other *radical*. Moderate scepticism is much closer to the first type of questioner (Q1) described in the beginning of this article. It is a scepticism that is concerned with the truth of things, and it is in fact based on the presupposition that there is an intelligible truth underlying our knowledge which allows the moderate sceptic to question the truth of things [50]. Without such presupposition, such basic ground, there will not be any way in ascertaining the truth of our beliefs. This moderate scepticism is a healthy one for it serves as an antidote to gullibility, i.e., the attitude of believing in just anything. This is also the kind of scepticism employed by the scientific community, and due to which there is progress in our understanding of the world. Scientific scepticism is founded on the supposed reliability of scientific methods.

Radical scepticism, on the other hand, is the second questioner (Q2) described above. It is radical in the sense that it questions the very idea that our beliefs, though they may be objectively true, can ever amount to knowledge. The radical sceptic’s main tactic is “to show that one does not have good epistemic reasons in support of one’s beliefs, and hence that one lacks knowledge” [75]. In contrast to moderate scepticism, this one is *not* grounded in science, nor in the conviction that we can *know* something about the truth. And Pritchard points out that this makes radical scepticism unjustified and groundless [50]. If we cannot know anything at all, then how can we evaluate any of our beliefs? It appeals to truth at the same time as it rejects its possibility. Or to make it more concrete, if even science cannot provide us knowledge, what criteria do we have in discerning what counts as knowledge or not.

He is worried that nowadays radical scepticism is becoming more and more popular, especially in public discourse. He sees a straight line from this kind of attitude

towards *relativism* i.e., the idea that truth is whatever anyone says it is, depending on one's perspective, that there's no right and wrong, or that every claim is equally accepted for it cannot be proven to be invalid [52]. He mentions common reasons why some people might be motivated to hold such an attitude, and offers clear-cut responses against them:

(a) although it is true that *many* things are dependent on one's relative perspective or subjective preference, it is not the case that *all* things are;

(b) although it might appear to be respectful of another person's opinion to accept it always as valid, it is actually disrespectful because it dismisses the person who is asserting something he considers to be objectively true;

(c) although the human mind is inherently fallible, it is not sufficient for the *mere possibility* of being wrong to consider all of one's knowledge to be dubitable, rather it requires a *specific reason* for doubting one's beliefs [64]—this in fact is what the scientific community does, i.e., while they remain open to being proven wrong (moderate scepticism), they do it to ascertain what they know, the goal is to get to the point where all the *specific reasons* for doubting are eliminated [65].

Moreover, against this relativistic attitude, he presents situations where it is in our best interest that there *must be* a truth independent of one's subjective assessments: for instance, when we are accused of a crime that we did not commit, or when consulting a doctor for an objective understanding of our condition [54]. But since this relativistic attitude is more pervasive on the social/political level, he also shows how the “liberating narratives” that employ sceptical and relativistic schemes in order to “undermine the existing power-structures” actually go against their very proponents, for if there is no such thing as objective justice then there would be *no reason* for the powerful ones who are benefitting from such arrangement to listen to the cries of injustice and the calls for freedom and equality [184]. And on a more personal level, Pritchard argues that radical scepticism ultimately takes away all meaning in one's existence, “[f]or how could one's existence make any sense if one lacks knowledge of even the most basic facts about one's life? In particular, why should one care about anything if one doesn't have any reason to think that it's real?” [81].

Pritchard gives us a very helpful distinction between radical scepticism as a *position* and as a *paradox* [122], a distinction whose implications he develops in *Chapter 4*. As a position, this is the scepticism employed by people in public life, with a certain interest in influencing decision making. As a paradox, this is the serious epistemological problem that troubled many philosophers over the centuries. Highlighting this distinction is necessary because oftentimes non-specialists get easily shaken when confronted with radical sceptical challenges regarding matters of everyday life, while in truth the radical sceptical position is not as philosophically founded as it presents itself to be. In fact, as Pritchard shows in the book, radical sceptical position in public would undermine itself if it were to utilize the philosophical strength of the radical sceptical paradox [179], for “[h]ow should we make sense of someone who claims not

to believe anything? How do we make sense of what they do, what they care about — including the radically sceptical claims that they make — and so forth if we take them seriously as being genuinely sceptical about everything?” [182]. Here Pritchard exposes how people employing the radical sceptical position in public are not actually interested in proving the truth of scepticism, but rather in something more practical, “[t]hey want us to believe *them* ... even if they don’t want us to believe much else” [183]. In a way, we can consider them as hypocritical sceptics.

After this critique on the radical sceptical position, *Chapter 4* goes on to provide reasons for why it is good (1) to practice moderate scepticism [195] and at the same time (2) to have *reasonable convictions* [208], dispositions that, at first hearing, may seem to be contradictory. On this, he relies on Aristotle’s idea of the *flourishing life* (eudaimonia) which considers and requires the two mentioned dispositions as intellectual virtues [217]. He contrasts this account of the good life to that of Pyrrho who proposed scepticism early on [201]. Although both are interested in happiness, they differ in the extent to which scepticism should be embraced to achieve the good life, and the difference lies in their conception of *the* good life. Aristotle’s position is presented as the more realistic one because it takes into account more facets of human life [203].

The discussion on radical scepticism as a paradox in *Chapters 2* and *3* would be of much interest to philosophers. This epistemological problem came out from the Cartesian methodical doubt that led to what we call today *external world scepticism* [87], i.e., the question of how we can be really sure of our knowledge of the external world when it is possible that we are just having a very *realistic dream*, or being deceived by a *malevolent demon*, or for a more contemporary example, a *brain in a vat*. Pritchard points out that when Descartes formulated this problem, he was not simply seeking to prove people how unsupported their beliefs were, nor was he concerned with the good life, but rather he was genuinely searching for a sure knowledge that would be immune to any sceptical argument, and thus can stand as the foundation of all other knowledge [88].

These sceptical possibilities are what is called *radical sceptical hypothesis*. They are hypothetical yet possible scenarios that are “not distinguishable from one’s everyday life” and where “most of what one believes is false” [90]. The strength of such hypotheses is that we cannot possibly rule them out, “we are unable to know whether we are not the victims of such scenarios” [106]. We cannot then possibly *know* that they are false, we cannot disprove them, and therefore, we “cannot be absolutely certain that what we ordinary believe is true” [107].

Pritchard introduces the reader into the rigor of argumentations about this problem, and the strongest argument (for scepticism) he presents was the one that makes use of the *closure principle*. This is an inferential principle which says that “if you know one proposition...and you know that this proposition entails a second proposition...then you know that second proposition too” [112]. Combined with this principle, the radical sceptical hypothesis casts strong doubts in one’s knowledge of everyday life. Using the

example of wearing a shirt and being a brain in a vat, Pritchard illustrates the power of such argument: Since (I *know* that) I cannot possibly know whether I am a brain in a vat or not, and (I *know* that) that entails that I cannot possibly know that I am wearing a shirt right now, then that means (I also *know* that) I cannot possibly know whether I am actually wearing a shirt right now [115]. From this the radical sceptic calls into question all of one's everyday mundane beliefs [118].

With the closure principle, we can no longer dismiss the radical sceptical hypothesis as just a remote possibility that is not powerful enough to make us doubt our everyday beliefs, as some objectors may point out [109]. Now, our mere inability to rule it out renders our everyday beliefs unreliable [125]. We are then confronted with a puzzle between these three ideas: (1) we cannot possibly rule out radical sceptical hypothesis, (2) the closure principle, and (3) that we know much of our everyday beliefs. When we consider each of them independently, we see that each one is convincingly true [121]. But then once we hold them all together, we see that (1) and (3) are incompatible, and that either of them as has to be false if we are to be consistent with our reasoning.

The radical sceptical position would not hesitate to argue that we have to let go of (3), but a more serene approach would be to acknowledge that we are confronted with a *paradox*: “we are committed to all three of them even though they can't be all true” [123]. What we want to achieve then is to overcome the inconsistency without rejecting our knowledge of everyday beliefs [124]. And this leads us to consider that perhaps there is something wrong with our “ordinary conception of knowledge” if it leads to inconsistency [123]. We need then to step back and examine our idea of knowledge.

Chapter 3 provides us with three plausible contemporary responses to the paradox. Pritchard begins with G.E. Moore's argument that our *common-sense* knowledge has a special rational status and that we must choose it over anti-common-sense ideas (e.g. the radical sceptical hypothesis) [137]. Although Moore does provide an explanation why we must reject such ideas, he merely argues that common-sense itself outrightly denies them [138]. Another position would be to say that the term “know” is *context-dependent*, in the same way as the *indexicals* like “I”, “here”, and “now” [144]. There are contexts that require a low demand of knowledge, such as when we use the term “know” in everyday language, and there are contexts that require a high demand of knowledge, as when philosophers consider the radical hypothetical hypothesis [146]. In this way the *contextualist* solves the problem: we can hold (1) and (3) together, but not in the same context.

The most interesting response was to invert scepticism, which Pritchard got from Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* (1969). It highlights the fact that moderate scepticism begins when we try to assess whether our beliefs are rationally grounded (i.e., with sufficient epistemic reasons) to qualify as knowledge [154]. Then Pritchard points out that *rational evaluation* is by nature *localized*, i.e., it evaluates the rationality of beliefs within the context of a certain set of beliefs that are taken to be knowledge [155]. To be able to rationally evaluate any belief then, one *must* first assume

a certain set of beliefs that are immune from questioning and absolutely certain—this is called *hinge certainty*, for the unquestionable beliefs serve like the hinge of a door [159]—and they are rather *arational*. The problem what is wrong with the “method of knowing” that brought about the radical sceptical paradox is the *globalization* of rational evaluation, i.e., the questioning of even the fundamental beliefs that allowed for rational evaluation in the first place [156]. The very idea then of rationally evaluating all of one’s beliefs is incoherent. This error is as much present among the radical sceptics as it is among traditional anti-sceptics like Descartes [159].

For each response, Pritchard also offers what he sees to be problematic. In the end, he neither intends to exhaust, nor to close the discussion on scepticism. His arguments, however, in his critique of *radical sceptical position* and its application, especially in political life, is incredibly wanting. He made it appear that such position is but a poor, inconsistent, and unsuccessful utilization of radical scepticism in the public square, as if there is no other theory to support such position but the radical sceptical paradox he sketched. Yet it remains a question whether those who take *that* position—the science sceptic and those who employ scepticism to support their liberating narratives—are in fact adapting the radical sceptical paradox as its “rational” defense.

It is arguable that there are other compelling theories out there which also promote scepticism, especially about the sciences and political life. The first thing that comes to mind is the “historicist philosophy of science”, with Thomas Kuhn’s *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1969) as its foundational text¹. Another figure under this umbrella, and even more popular, is Michel Foucault, whose *archeology*² and *genealogy of knowledge*³ are probably the most influential ideas of the postmodernism that is strongly present in many universities today.

This is not to say that Kuhn or Foucault, or the likes of them, are plainly right. But an introduction to the contemporary discourse on scepticism would have been more adequate if Pritchard included the historicist defense for scepticism and, even more impressive, provided an argument against it. With this, his critique against the relativistic tendency of scepticism in the public square would have been stronger and more comprehensive.

The writing style is clear and concise, the examples are easily relatable, philosophically technical ideas are presented in an accessible way without dumbing them down. It also helps that the author does not get tired of providing a summary of the

¹ Thomas NICKLES, “Historicist Theories of Scientific Rationality,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2020 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/rationality-historicist/>.

² Gary GUTTING, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 268. Archeology of Knowledge is “method of analysis that reveals the intellectual structures that underlie and make possible the entire range of diverse...concepts, methods, theories characterizing the thought of a given period.”

³ *Ibid.*, 278. The genealogy of knowledge begins from the assumption that changes in “epistemes” of different periods are shaped by the power structures of society.

previous topic at the beginning a new one. The argumentation of the book relies heavily on precise definitions and clear distinctions, especially between things whose confusion oftentimes causes scepticism. Given this reliance on definitions, it would have helped if the author provided a glossary of important terms.

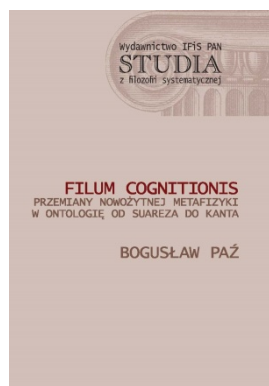
Nevertheless, as an introduction to the subject, the book is certainly successful. A lay reader would regain some sense of confidence in his/her everyday beliefs after reading this book, and for a philosophy student who is bothered by radical scepticism but has always been intimidated to engage the subject, this book is a sure guide into the discussion. This book, however, does not go beyond the subject of scepticism. If, for instance, one is looking for a defense against metaphysical agnosticism or for knowing absolute moral principles, this book does not say that much.

IZABELA PASTERNAK

TRANSFORMACJE METAFIZYKI W ONTOLOGIĘ

Bogusław PAŹ. *FILUM COGNITIONIS. Przemiany nowożytnej metafizyki w ontologię od Suareza do Kanta*. Studia z Filozofii Systematycznej. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IFiS PAN, 2019, 556 ss. ISBN: 978-0-19-882916-4.

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W 2019 r. nakładem Wydawnictwa IFiS PAN, w ramach serii „Studia z Filozofii Systematycznej” pod redakcją Seryny Blandziego, ukazała się książka Bogusława Pazia, profesora Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, pt. *FILUM COGNITIONIS. Przemiany nowożytnej metafizyki w ontologię od Suareza do Kanta*. Przedmiot pracy jest ujęty już w tytule książki: prześledzenie historycznego procesu przemiany greckiej i scholastycznej metafizyki w nowożytną ontologię. Jak pisze sam Autor, jego celem było „[...] pokazać ukryty porządek i logikę w przemianach rozumienia bytu, które nadają dzie-

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