

[1973. In *Baker's Dictionary of Christian Ethics*. Carl F.H. Henry, ed. Washington D.C.: Canon Press.]

SKEPTICISM. See also *Doubt*. Skepticism as popularly conceived means only a doubt or questioning attitude toward one thing or another. Ethical skepticism would be a doubt, or rather, a denial of moral principles. This is often the result of a non-skeptical, a dogmatic, scientism. Physics seems so certain as to compel acceptance, whereas everybody has his own moral standards; therefore these latter are regarded as relative, subjective, and without universal application.

Philosophical skepticism is a denial that knowledge is possible. It is the normal result of empirical epistemology and has uniformly been opposed by realists such as Plato, Augustine, Descartes, Hegel, and unsuccessfully, by the non-realist though non-empiricist Kant.

Skepticism began with the Sophists before 400 B.C. Plato showed that their identification of knowledge as perception implies that knowledge is impossible.

Pyrrho (365-275) originated a continuous skeptical school that lasted to A.D. 200. He denied knowledge, considered virtue to be conventional, and therefore recommended a life of impassiveness or apathy.

Arcesilaus (315-240) attacked the Stoic criterion of truth- the comprehensive representation- and urged suspension of judgment. Carneades (219-129) also opposed the Stoics: there is no criterion, for any sensory image may be deceptive. The insolubilia show that logic is untrustworthy. Practical action requires no opinions: as living beings men cannot avoid doing something. There is some evidence that Carneades admitted that some actions were preferable to others. This would be an inconsistency.

Aenesidemus (80 B.C.-A.D. 130) collects ten arguments, of which some are : sensory images depend on organs, these differ from animal to animal, therefore no image is truer to nature than any other; one sense contradicts another sense, as the pole half in water looks bent but feels straight; no object is ever experienced in isolation and the surroundings alter its appearances; customs and morality vary- no one view can be insisted upon.

Sextus Empiricus (c. A.D. 200) was the last of the ancient skeptics. Plotinus (205-270) and later Augustine (354-430) defeated the skeptical school by refuting the empiricism on which it was based.

In modern times, passing over Montaigne as a non-philosophical popularizer, the greatest skeptic of all was David Hume. For him knowledge consisted in sensory images that were images of nothing occurring in a mind that did not exist.

Kant tried to reinstate space, time, and causality. This presumably permitted a science of appearances, but the “real” world of things in themselves remained unknowable. After Hegel, for whom nothing was unknowable, there came an irrationalism exemplified in Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, James, and Dewey. Though the appellation is infrequently used, these two are skeptics. (See entries on names mentioned.)

GORDON H. CLARK