

this case, the term refers to an *attitude or a mental capacity*:

Scepticism is an ability, or mental attitude, which opposes appearances to judgements in any way whatsoever, with the result that, owing to the equipollence of the objects and reasons thus opposed, we are brought firstly to a state of mental suspense and next to a state of "unperturbedness" or "quietude" (Sextus Empiricus, *Outline of Pyrrhonism*, Loeb Classical Library, trans. R. G. Bury, I, 8).

Scepticism in this sense was applied not only to claims to certain and justified knowledge but also and probably foremost to beliefs as to the real nature of things.

Taken both ways, as a position and as an attitude, scepticism has primarily to do with the theory of knowledge. But it can be brought to bear on problems of metaphysics and ontology by being applied to claims to metaphysical or ontological knowledge. A sceptical *position* declares metaphysical and ontological knowledge to be impossible. The sceptical *attitude* or capacity opposes metaphysical and ontological beliefs and results in suspense of judgement. At first blush, then, either brand of scepticism seems to have negative implications only with regard to metaphysics and ontology and seems not to be committed to any metaphysical or ontological stance.

At closer analysis, however, this impression cannot be upheld. For it can be argued – as we shall presently see – that scepticism in either form shares assumptions which are made also by metaphysical realism. I take it that metaphysical realism is the conjunction of three theses:

Scepticism

The term 'scepticism' refers to positions and attitudes in epistemology or the theory of knowledge. Most people associate with scepticism the *position* that nothing can be known for certain. This conception of scepticism can be found already in early Christian philosophy (Augustine, *Contra Academicos*) and it has been prevalent since the Middle Ages. But 'scepticism' is used also in connection with a tradition in ancient philosophy and, in

1. Human judgement has the power of representation; i.e. human judgements are true or false descriptions of – in general – judgement-transcendent subject matter.
2. Reality represented is – in general – causally independent of its being represented (correctly or incorrectly) by human judgement and the way of its being thus represented.
3. Human judgement can reach a knowledge of reality, and, as a matter of fact,

to a certain degree we obtain such knowledge.

1. is a semantic thesis, 2. might be considered the metaphysical thesis of realism, and only 3. is of epistemological character.

Obviously, scepticism does not opt wholesale for metaphysical realism. This is so because scepticism does not adopt the epistemological thesis 3. On the other hand, it seems as though the metaphysical and the semantic theses are presupposed by scepticism. In order to show this I shall first discuss strategies used by ancient sceptics for bringing about suspense of judgement in themselves and in others. Then I will take a very cursory look at modern scepticism; that is, sceptical traditions since the 16th century.

Sextus Empiricus (c.150 – c.225) in his *Outline of Pyrrhonism* describes the strategies adopted by the ancient scepticist. As can be seen from the above quotation the moving force of the sceptical attitude in antiquity was the hope of reaching mental quietude. The sceptics started this process by opposing each judgement to an equipollent alternative. They believed that people do not take a firm stance on a subject matter when confronted with equally plausible alternatives. In this way the sceptic comes to suspense of judgement, a state of mind in which he does not affirm or deny anything. This procedure involves metaphysical realism (minus thesis 3.) in two ways.

First, it seems to be suggested that there is a reality independent of human judgements and of the people passing judgements, a reality with things having an ultimate nature. This is indicated by the sceptic's use of terms like φαίνόμενον and φύσις. Central to the sceptic's procedure is the opposition of different 'appearances' (φαίνόμενα): it is assumed that things can appear in different ways to different persons or even to the same person. If these appearances are equipollent we are led to suspension of judgement with regard to the φύσις of the things investigated. Here φύσις seems to refer to the nature of things, to how things really are (e.g. *Outline*, I, 27, 28, 30, 59; see also Sextus's talk of τὰ ἔξωθεν ὑποκείμενα – i.e. of external substances or external realities, e.g. I, 54).

Whereas the appearances vary, the nature of things, their φύσις, is taken to remain fixed.

Second, the sceptical strategy brings different appearances into opposition to each other. The appearances are opposed to each other, ἀντικείμενα. But what does it mean for judgements or appearances to be opposed to each other? When confronted with opposing appearances, says Sextus, we cannot assent to all of them. For in this case, "we shall be attempting the impossible and accepting contradictories" (I, 88). Hence, if opposed judgements or appearances are equipollent we are led to suspension of judgement. This suspension is, as we have seen, with regard to the φύσις of things, their real nature. The suspension of judgement, thus, seems to regard the *truth* of the judgements involved. Two judgements, then, are opposed to each other if it is impossible that both can be true at the same time. This talk of opposition seems to presuppose that judgements can be true or false descriptions of the nature of things, and this means that they have the power of representation. Thus, ancient scepticism is committed also to the semantic thesis of metaphysical realism.

Sceptical strategies in antiquity were connected with scepticism as an attitude and were aimed at the quietude of mind. Modern sceptical strategies are linked to scepticism as a position (which may be either merely entertained or fully adopted) and are less practically oriented. Many thinkers used sceptical arguments for the defence of Christian faith against possible clashes with claims of reason (see Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism. From Erasmus to Spinoza*, 1979). Other thinkers used sceptical strategies as preparatory to the attempt to give a foundation for metaphysical and scientific knowledge. But this modern kind of sceptical thought also presupposes the semantic and metaphysical parts of realism. A case in point is René Descartes. In his *Meditations*, with the method of universal doubt he wanted to liberate the mind from all prejudice and make it capable of indubitable true judgement (see the first Meditation). Universal doubt was used to make plausible the position that all our beliefs, perceptual and otherwise, could be false. An evil demon

might deceive me completely with regard to the external world and even with regard to my body and mind. This sceptical strategy also operates with the concepts of truth, falsity, and deception. Thus it acknowledges that human judgement has the power of representation, even though it may misrepresent reality. With this it is supposed that the external world, and even our body and mind could be otherwise than we judge them to be. The way they are is taken to be independent of our judgement. Therefore, also the metaphysical thesis of realism is presupposed.

FURTHER READING

- Annas, J., and Barnes, J., 1985, *The Modes of Scepticism. Ancient Texts and Modern Interpretations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Burnyeat, M., 1980, "Can the sceptic live his scepticism", in M. Schofield, M. Burnyeat, and J. Barnes, eds., *Doubt and Dogmatism*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Dal Pra, M., 1975, *Lo scetticismo greco*, vol. 1, 2nd ed., Bari: Laterza.
- Hossenfelder, M., 1968, *Sextus Empiricus. Grundriss der pyrrhonischen Skepsis*, intr. and trans., Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

AXEL BÜHLER