

Original Paper

The Place of Skepticism in the 21st Century Gnoseological Debate: Selecting Logical Positivism and Postmodernism

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Abstract

This study is centered on The Place of Skepticism in the 21st Century Gnoseological Debate: Selecting Logical Positivism and Postmodernism. Within the context of Western philosophy, skepticism, which arguably began in the ancient times with the likes of Gorgias neither ends with the Contra Academicos of St. Augustine nor with Kant's noumena as some scholars argued. Skepticism is an indispensable part of epistemic discourse that cuts across diverse ages of philosophical discipline ranging from the ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary; and also permeates all the branches of philosophy. The philosophical postulates of the logical positivists who unequivocally argued that any proposition that cannot be subjected to their verification principle is meaningless, was occasioned by skepticism. The postmodernist philosophers' argument against objective knowledge, grand totalizing, and their downplaying of foundationalism, was orchestrated by skepticism. It is the position of this study that skepticism is not only a continuum, but most importantly, the episteme-vitae (the life-wire of epistemology). As a necessary evil in the philosophical discipline skepticism is an inevitable driving force in the 21st century gnoseological debate, and instrumentum laboris (instrument of labour) in the hands of philosophers. The research methods employed in this work include: analytic, contextual, historical, and textual.

Keywords

Episteme-vitae, logical positivism, postmodernism, skepticism, 21st century gnoseological debate.

1. Introduction

We can say that skepticism held sway in the pre-Socratic and ancient times of philosophical inquiry, and was completely defeated by St. Augustine of Hippo's master stroke—The *Contra Academicos*. However, skeptical approach to knowledge was finally put to rest in the modern period with the skepticism of Descartes, Hume, and Kant who argued that things as they are—the *noumena* cannot be known (Jones & Williams, p. 9).

The problem this study sets out to grapple with is to know whether skepticism actually got to its culminating point in modern epoch as held above or if there could be any trace of skepticism in the 21st century epistemological discourse. This work does not subscribe to the position of Jones and Williams because they are not completely correct in so far as skepticism and knowledge acquisition are concerned. Skepticism is as old as philosophy, and one of its branches—epistemology. There is no epoch in epistemology in particular and philosophy in general where the presence of skepticism cannot be successfully traced. In this research, gnoseology is interchangeably employed with epistemology and theory of knowledge. It has to be remarked that 21st century epistemology is so vast that it might be difficult to be encapsulated in one single dissertation how much more this brief research.

The essence of selecting only two themes: logical positivism and postmodernism is to clearly define the scope of this study for clarity and precision. It is so because naturalized epistemology, humanizing epistemology, the Gettier problem, feminist epistemology, genetic epistemology, mentalism, virtue epistemology, environmental epistemology, integrative epistemology, and a host of others are essential parts of contemporary epistemological debate. Considering the fact that skepticism holds sway and, in fact, is the strong force, which philosophers challenged and the challenge metamorphosed into epistemology as a branch of philosophy, this work therefore considers skepticism as the *episteme vitae* (the life-wire of knowledge). It is so because skepticism has been a reoccurring decimal such that even after being defeated by St. Augustine, in his work, *The Contra Academicos*, it has consistently reared its head, which indicates that though defeated, and yet it remains a strong member of the philosophical discipline establishing its presence in all the branches and epochs of philosophy. In fact, there is evidence of skepticism in all the epochs along the ages of the history of the development of philosophy and contemporary epoch is not an exception. Skepticism is construed in this work as the springboard and launch pad of epistemic discourse across diverse ages of philosophical enterprise.

Just like the universal skeptic Gorgias denied the possibility of knowledge in general, and Protagoras, while being skeptical of the possibility of objective knowledge relativised knowledge, Schlick, Neurath, Ayer and other logical positivists were so skeptical of non-experiential knowledge that they literally jettisoned metaphysics and any form of knowledge that cannot be subjected to their verification principle as meaningless. Lyotard, Foucault, Derrida and other postmodernist thinkers advancing deconstruction in knowledge not only denied the possibility of objective knowledge but radically downplayed foundationalism and any form of grand totalizing which traditional epistemology strongly upholds. Skepticism, if critically examined, could be seen to have changed the epistemic narrative of

philosophical enterprise right from the ancient times till this 21st century. In fact, “One of the greatest advantages of skepticism is that it ushers in epistemology which is traditionally known as theory of knowledge” (Ijiomah, p. 13).

1.1 An Attempt at Defining Skepticism

If one says that one knows anything, one of the implications is that one knows with certainty. That is why in a sense, knowledge implies certainty. To claim to know something implies being sure or certain about that thing. If a person is not sure of anything, he cannot claim to know it. From the earliest beginning of philosophical discourse, some philosophers claimed that nobody could be sure or certain about anything. For them, certainty was an impossible task. As it were, epistemology gradually developed in diverse cultures of the world when scholars responded to the challenges of the skeptics by way of critique, appraisal, critical evaluation, or even criticism.

Skepticism is a philosophical attitude which means doubt or the denial of the possibility of knowledge. Etymologically, skepticism derives from the Greek word “skeptikos’ which means “inquirers’. There is another variant of the same concept “skeptikos’ which means “inquiry”. It then implies that traditionally, all seekers of knowledge were referred to as “skeptics” that is, “inquirers”. Skepticism, in the most common sense, is the refusal to grant that there is any knowledge or justification. Skepticism can be either practical or theoretical, either moderate or radical.... (Audi, 738). As a critical philosophical attitude, skepticism questions the reliability of the knowledge claims made by philosophers and others. Skeptics question almost everything that concerns knowledge. Upholding this view and making reference to skeptics and skepticism, *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy Volume Seven* holds that:

They have questioned whether any necessary or indubitable information can actually be gained about the real nature of things. Skeptics have organized their questioning into systematic sets of arguments aimed at raising doubts. Extreme skepticism questions all knowledge claims that go beyond immediate experience, except perhaps those of logic and mathematics. A limited or mitigated skepticism in different degrees questions particular types of knowledge claims made by theologians, metaphysicians, scientists, or mathematicians who go beyond experience, but it admits some limited probabilistic kind of knowledge (p. 449).

Some skeptics have held that no knowledge beyond immediate experience is possible, while others have doubted whether even this much could definitely be known. The arguments advanced by skeptics from Greek times onward, and the use to which these arguments have been put, have helped to shape both the problems dealt with by the major Western philosophers and the solutions they have offered (p. 449). It would be a mark of logical inconsistency and a great disservice to Africa if this study fails to note that it is not only in Greek times that skepticism flourished, there is also skepticism from the African perspective and from the perspectives of other cultures of the world. Advancing this view would mean going outside the scope of the study.

1.2 Gnoseology: A Conceptual Clarification

Another name for epistemology is gnoseology. Gnoseology is derived from the Greek word, “gnosis” which has its English equivalent as “cognition”. Epistemology or gnoseology or theory of knowledge is therefore the study or science of the cognition, scope, extent, function, and limit of human knowledge. Etymologically, epistemology also derives from two Greek words, “episteme”—“knowledge” and “logos”—“study” or “science”. And so, epistemology means “the study or science of knowledge”. By implication, within the context of this research, gnoseology and epistemology can be interchangeably employed to mean one and the same thing. In line with this view, Bright argued that, “In so far as philosophy as a discipline is concerned, another name for epistemology is gnoseology.” (p. 56). It is also important to note that traditionally, epistemology as a branch of philosophy has also been known and identified as theory of knowledge. That is why Pollock noted that, “From the contemporary stand-point, epistemology as the theory of knowledge would seem naturally to have knowledge as its principal focus...Epistemology has traditionally focused on epistemic justification more than on knowledge” (7). The concept, theory of knowledge, was introduced into philosophical lexicon by a Scottish philosopher, James Frederick Ferrier (Bachana, 2).

2. Methods

In this paper, analytic, contextual, historical, and textual methods of inquiry are employed.

2.1 Analytic

It has been clearly shown that analytic tool is indispensable in the 21st century philosophical discourse. This paper, therefore, adopted the tool of analysis for clarity and precision of the findings. In the process of analysis, this study tries to find out what other scholars have done in the past on the concept of skepticism, especially as it is related to logical positivism and postmodernism; the current position of scholars in the area of study and the contribution to knowledge to improve on their positions.

2.2 Contextual

Contextually, this work is anchored on skepticism, logical positivism and postmodernism within the purview of 21st century not losing sight of the preceding epochs. The procedure is essentially expository.

2.3 Historical

Historical analysis employed in this study clearly shows that there is a necessary link between the ancient (the cradle of skepticism), medieval, renaissance interlude, modern and contemporary epochs where logical positivism and postmodernism hold sway in epistemological debates.

2.4 Textual

In this work, textbooks were extensively consulted where works of authors on the subject of discourse are encapsulated. Apart from few works from the internet, the references in this paper are essentially from textbooks in soft and hard copies.

3. Skepticism as the *Episteme-Vitae*

Skepticism is the fulcrum or pedestal upon which epistemology, as a branch of philosophy, is built and stands. The place of skepticism in the 21st century gnoseological debate is very apparent, especially considering logical positivism and postmodernism. Still threading with the themes: logical positivism and postmodernism, it has to be reiterated without equivocations that the basis upon which contemporary epistemic discourse operates is built on skepticism. In fact, skepticism is the catalyst and the springboard upon which contemporary epistemological reflections and counter reflections hold sway. Skepticism is an intrinsic part of philosophy. The 21st century gnoseological debate considering logical positivism and postmodernism with their revolutionary and radicalized approach was motivated by doubt by the inquirers—seekers of knowledge. By implication, without skepticism, there is no epistemology because it is in reacting to the arguments skeptics advanced against the possibility of knowledge that epistemologists rise to the occasion to prove that knowledge is possible, and that within the domain of knowledge there are absolute, objective, relative, experiential (empirical), non-experiential (spiritual/metaphysical), apodictic strands of knowledge; and that knowledge is a continuum. In all these, skepticism has been clearly construed as the *episteme-vitae* (the life-wire of knowledge).

4. The Place of Skepticism in the 21st Century Gnoseological Debate: Selecting Logical Positivism and Postmodernism

In order to ensure clarity and precision, it becomes of importance to independently delineate on the two themes which form the scope of this study namely: logical positivism and postmodernism and see where skepticism can be located in each of them.

4.1 Skepticism Occasioned Logical Positivism

Logical positivism at its earliest beginning can be traced to the philosophy of Ernst Mach. Born in 1838, Mach's works were anti-metaphysics. As a professor at the University of Vienna, Austria, Europe, Mach specialized as a physicist and abhorred anything metaphysics. Logical positivism can also be construed from two perspectives namely: as a term or concept and as a philosophy. Whether it is employed as a concept or as a philosophy, logical positivism was first employed by A.E. Blumberg and Herbert Fiegl in 1931 to a set of philosophical ideas espoused by the members of the Vienna cycle. The members of the Vienna cycle were philosophers, scientists, and mathematicians who shared common ideology and were strongly convinced that philosophy and science must have a standard way of approach. It is important to note that another name for logical positivism is logical empiricism.

With its skeptical approach about the possibility of unverifiable systems of thought like metaphysics, logical positivism as a school of philosophy of science in the 1920's and 1930's adopted methodology that uphold the preeminence of science over and above all other methods. In 1922 after the death of Mach, this movement centred around the leadership of Moritz Schlick, the founder of the Vienna cycle. It was a time when Schlick was invited as a professor of philosophy to the University of Vienna to

deliver a paper titled, “Future of Philosophy” (Neurath & Carnap, p. 875). To be noted is that Schlick described the positivism of Ernst Mach and Avenarius as “Immanence Positivism” (Wolfgang, 269).

The logical empiricists strongly hold that scientific knowledge should be the guide for all cognitive discourses because of certainty that characterized the result of scientific findings in their time. This was, among other things, an outstanding influence the logical positivists had at the very beginning of their philosophical exploit. It is on this note that the logical positivists of the Vienna cycle advocated for the principle of verification. For them, any philosophical postulate that cannot be empirically verified could be likened to nothingness arising from obnoxious mentality. This is skepticism at work (Austin, 63).

The very first time logical positivism was discussed and introduced among philosophical experts was in 1930 at Oxford during the seventh international philosophical congress (conference). It was at that brainstorming philosophical forum that Schlick emphasizing scientific rigor in the course of his paper presentation tried to convince scholars of diverse philosophical orientation and background that their (members of the Vienna cycle) new method will settle all hitherto existing philosophical problems. In the course of his presentation he employed the term “logical positivism”, which has today metamorphosed into a philosophical movement as well as a philosophical theory. It has to be recalled that long before the empiricists of the Vienna cycle, David Hume had flourished and *ab initio* advocated for extinction of metaphysics in philosophical enterprise. According to David Hume as cited in Oswald (*Logical Positivism*, 41),

When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hands any volume: of divinity, of school of metaphysics, for instance, let us ask, does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames for it can contain nothing, but sophistry and illusion (p. 41).

This is skepticism at play. It has to be recalled that it is the same skeptical posture Hume had that the Viennese empiricists had in so far as knowledge of reality that is not experientially oriented is concerned. They strongly doubted the contribution of metaphysics in advancement of knowledge. For them, science is the only way to acquisition of knowledge. It is their thinking that metaphysics was the primary cause of their so called stunted growth experienced in philosophy over the years. And so, any statement that does not meet the test of verification should be discarded as useless. They further argued that, knowledge necessarily has to be an experiential activity. From all these, the primary objective of the logical positivists encapsulated in their verifiability principle is to discard metaphysics in all spheres of knowledge.

Similarly, the logical empiricists had enormous influence from Hume, Mach, and Wittgenstein. Of course, Wittgenstein was closely associated with Schlick and Waisman. To be noted is that, A.J. Ayer has remained outstanding as the most vibrant exponent or propagator of logical positivism as a philosophical movement. In fact, in his work, *Language, Truth and Logic* published in 1936, Ayer

highlighted the basic principles of logical positivism of which the principle of verification with which they raised doubt about knowledge of non-experiential realities is very prominent.

Being skeptical to a fault, the logical positivists unanimously agreed that the only pathway to the meaningfulness of philosophy and science would be a total rejection of metaphysics from the domain of knowledge. They did not stop at that, as they went on with their doubt in approaching knowledge. The empiricists of the Vienna cycle with the influence of Ockham, Hume, Mach, and Wittgenstein adopted Ockham's razor of non multiplication of entities, Hume's idea of no experiential evidence, no knowledge, Mach's physics and Wittgenstein's language game doing away with meaningless expressions (that cannot be verified) embodied in metaphysics. That is why they construed that the problem associated with delivering a philosophy paper on non-experiential realities lie in language. Again, language that cannot be subjected to critical empirical scrutiny is simply useless. In all these, skepticism holds sway (Austin, 45).

To round off this segment of the study, it is considered necessary to point out some of the exponents of logical positivism. The reputable members of this group are on the philosophical side, men like Moritz Schlick, Rudolf Carnap, Otto Neurath, Herbert Fiegl, Fredrick Waisman, Edger Zilsel, and Victor Kraft, and on the scientific and mathematical side were men like Philip Frank, Karl Menger, Kurl Godel and Hans Han (Ayer, 3). Munitz also highlights that, "In the United States there were positivistically oriented thinkers like Charles W. Morris, Ernest Nagel, and W. V. O. Quine. In Scandinavia we had Eino Kaila and Joergen Joergensen (p. 239).

4.2 Postmodernism: A 21st Century Philosophical Theory Orchestrated by Skepticism

As a contemporary philosophical discourse, postmodernism was orchestrated by skepticism. Again, postmodernism cannot be fully approached from a single disciplinary frame of reference. The elasticity of its dimension is such that postmodernism can be discussed not only in philosophy but also in diverse regions of studies, especially within the disciplines of Arts and Humanities dovetailing into the Social Sciences. Uduigwomen instantiating this position writes, "Postmodernism is a post contemporary vogue which cuts across different disciplines such as philosophy, literature, Arts, social sciences, architecture, history and in short, the entire gamut of humanistic intellectual endeavours" (v). That is why postmodernism is discussed in this research within the context of epistemic branch of philosophy. According to Dickson, postmodernism with its radicalism is necessitated by doubt. Its exponents were skeptical of any philosophy and methodology being objectively construed as a grand norm for philosophizing. For them, there is no such theory. That is why the like of Feyerabend, the forefather of postmodernism and Rorty, at different occasions advocate "anything goes", and reading through Quine, he has not said anything different in so far as certification of reality and grand totalizing is concerned (p. 107).

One of the leading exponents of postmodernism, Jean-Francois Lyotard as cited in Sarup (*An Introductory Guide to Post Structuralism and Post Modernism*, 113), holds that, postmodernism is the name for a movement in advanced capitalist culture, particularly in the arts. The term postmodernism

originated among artists and critics in New York in the 1970s. Lyotard highlights the guiding principles behind postmodernism. He attacks the legitimating myths of the modern age, which he refers to as the grand narrative or grand totalizing of ideas. Lyotard and other scholars of postmodernist orientation believe that through science as dominant intellectual paradigm, human mind will be liberated and enabled to develop a universal knowledge for the whole of humanity. It is with this mindset that postmodernism became identified with the critique of universal knowledge and foundationalism.

Postmodernism as an epistemological trend is controversial, revolutionary, radicalizing, disarming, nihilistic, anarchistic, fragmentary, and renescent at the same time. Postmodernism rejects epistemological assumptions, reflects methodological conventions, resists knowledge claims, and obscures all versions of truth (Rosenau, 1). In postmodernism confidence is reposed more on emotion than on impartial observation; while relativism is preferred to objectivity, and fragmentation to totalizing. Postmodernism is against foundationalism, the possibility of truth, universal knowledge, any form of objectivity in our quest for knowledge. The postmodernist thinkers ... question authority and the authority imposition of any singular, systematic point of view (Rosenau, 13). Postmodernism is, in fact, a deconstructionist approach to knowledge skeptically engineered. At the heart of postmodernist philosophy is a strong doubt against the claims made by the exponents of foundationalism in philosophy (Uzoma, 115).

The writings of prominent modern philosophers like Marx, Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Husserl to mention a few influenced postmodernist thought and practice. Having motivated this movement in arts popularly known as postmodernism, some of the outstanding philosophers who flourished within this ambience of learning include: Jean Francois-Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Michael Foucault, Richard Rorty, and so forth. The objective certification of reality, among other things, is what the postmodernist thinkers are strongly against. For them, objective certification of reality is “unattainable”. This skeptical view is in tandem with the position of Richard Rorty. It was previously held that philosophy gives the guideline in understanding reality. Rorty downplayed and jettisoned this thought-pattern in his *Philosophy and Mirror of Nature*, arguing that philosophy does not mirror nature. He employed and actually advocated for free communication as the authentic mechanism of mirroring nature. This is one of the high points of postmodernist skeptical approach to reality.

5. Conclusion

This research has clearly demonstrated that no matter how skepticism is employed either as an inquiry or as doubt, it is apparent that skepticism is the catalyst upon which logical positivism and postmodernism are grafted into philosophical lexicon. It is in this important sense that skepticism is considered as a necessary evil in all the epochs of gnoseological debate and, in fact, helps epistemology to thrive. It has also been discovered that skepticism actually ushers in epistemology into the philosophical household.

The logical positivists and their adoption of verifiability principle without which no proposition

qualified as knowledge is itself a skeptical approach to knowledge. It has also been discovered that the philosophical postulates of postmodernist thinkers was orchestrated by skepticism. This work strongly holds that skepticism permeates contemporary gnoseological debate just like other preceding epochs where epistemic discourses were also engineered by skepticism. It is on the basis of this inevitability of skepticism in epistemological debate that this work holds that skepticism holds sway in contemporary epistemic inquiry and, as such, the life-wire of epistemology, which is technically called the *episteme-vitae*.

The implication of this is that without skepticism there is no epistemology and by extension, without skepticism there is no philosophy as an organized academic discipline. Claims and counter claims made by philosophers to withstand skeptics help in the strengthening and advancement of philosophical discipline. Skepticism is the *instrumentum laboris*—instrument of labour with which philosophers bring out new ideas, concepts, and theories which are eventually engrafted into philosophical lexicon. Skepticism is a necessary evil in the philosophical enterprise which proximately or remotely helps in expanding the horizon of epistemic inquiry in particular and philosophical discipline in general. And so, skepticism plays a pivotal role and stands at the foundation of the 21st century gnoseological debate. It is, therefore, erroneous to hold that skepticism ended with the modern era of epistemic discourse. Skepticism, in so far as quest for and acquisition of knowledge is concerned, is a continuum.

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