

**Philosophical Skepticism and the Future of Faith-based Higher
Institutions in Nigeria**

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ABSTRACT

Skepticism, as a philosophical construct, posits that judgment should be suspended in all matters; meaning that there are no objective criteria for determining what truth in a given situation is. Two of its most ardent proponents were Sextus Empiricus and David Hume. Both were skeptics who insisted that every issue has two sides and every question can be argued to a stalemate. The position taken by skeptics, apparently conflicts with the ethical and philosophical premise of faith-based higher institutions in Nigeria and perhaps elsewhere, especially because of the emphasis of the latter on moral absolutes and a belief system. While philosophical skepticism may be in harmony with liberal educational institutions but that cannot be said of faith-based institutions that recognize verities in the quest for knowledge.

Key words: Skepticism, moral absolutes, faith-based, belief system, knowledge

I Introduction

Skepticism may be understood as a philosophical construct which refers to an attitude of doubting the knowledge claims set forth in various areas of human endeavors. It involves asking questions about the premise upon which such knowledge claims are made and trying to establish their veracity. Skeptics have thus challenged the alleged grounds of accepted assumptions in metaphysics, in science, in morals and manners, and especially in religion (McGinn, 1989). To believe something is not to know it. One irrefutable point is that there are beliefs that are false.

It is pertinent to distinguish between what is philosophically known as skeptical doubting as opposed to forms of doubting. For example, if Gabriel Adesanya tells you that Ann, your first daughter, was born on July 14, 1996 and you know it is July 4, 1996, you will doubt Joe's words because you strongly believe you have the truth. This is not skeptical doubting. Consider instead a different scenario. Adesanya tells you he believes your grandfather once lived in a village called Igiri; you do not have any way to disprove him, but you are not confident that his source is reliable. In this case, you do not believe you have the truth otherwise, but you just do not want to commit neither to the truth nor to the falsity of Adesanya's statement. You are now raising a skeptical doubt towards Adesanya's claim: its mark is the suspension of judgment.

Skeptical doubts may be understood from two perspectives. The doubt may arise as a result of distrust of someone's capacity to know certain things. This kind of doubt is often referred to as *epistemic skepticism*, from the Greek *episteme*, "knowledge" (Feldman, 2001). Or you may doubt that something exists, as when you doubt whether God exists, or that there is a ghost in the house. This is *ontological skepticism* (Fedman, 2001). The most famous formulations of skepticism are of the epistemic variety.

Evidentialism, a widespread theory of knowledge, is couched in the belief that knowledge entails reliability (Dretske, 1981). Essentially this means one's knowledge of certain things -be - be it a clock in your computer or the person sitting next to you – must be based on the degree of reliability of the source of information or to what extent the source can be trusted. Skepticism is precisely the attitude of doubting the reliability of one's sources. Mere thinking about what time it is, is not enough; one must be able to ascertain whether the source of the information, that is, the clock is functioning well.

II Etymology of Skepticism

The term is derived from the Greek verb "skeptomai" (which means "to look carefully, to reflect"), and the early Greek Skeptics were known as the Skeptikoi (DeRose and Warfield, 1999:12). As already indicated Scepticism refers to an attitude of doubt or incredulity, either in general or toward a particular object, or to any doubting or questioning attitude or state of mind. The concept sharply contrasts dogmatism, the idea that established beliefs are not to be disputed, doubted or diverged from. Both concepts are diametrically opposed.

In a nutshell, skepticism can refer to:

- an inquiry
- the limitations of knowledge
- a method of obtaining knowledge through systematic doubt and continual testing
- the arbitrariness, relativity, or subjectivity of moral values
- a method of intellectual caution and suspended judgment

III History of Skepticism

Historically, philosophical Skepticism may be traced to the Skeptic school of ancient Greece. Pyrrho of Elis, who travelled and studied as far as India, propounded the adoption of what he called "practical skepticism" (Mates, 1996:76). Pyrrho had sought to attain inner peace amidst the confusion he experienced in the face of various competing schools of thought of the time. Upon admitting his perplexity, he finally achieved the inner peace (or ataraxia) that he had been seeking (and which became the ultimate goal of the early Skeptikoi). Thus Pyrrho of Elis, took the philosophical position that one should refrain from making truth claims, and avoid the postulation of final truths (Mates, 1996). This is not necessarily quite the same as claiming that truth is impossible (which would itself be a truth claim), but is often also used to cover the position that there is no such thing as certainty in human knowledge.

It must, however, be noted that long before the postulations of Pyrrho, there had been a subsisting claim by Gorgias that nothing exists; or, if something does exist, then it cannot be known; or if something does exist and can be known, it cannot be communicated (Hankinson, 1995). In a similar vein Socrates claimed that he knew one and only one thing: that he knew nothing. This may explain the pedagogical approach adopted by Socrates: rather than making assertions or opinions, he set about questioning people who claimed to have knowledge, ostensibly for the purpose of learning from them.

Much later, Agrippa the Skeptic established five grounds of doubt:

- Dissent - the uncertainty of the rules of common life, and of the opinions of philosophers.
- Progress ad infinitum - all proof requires some further proof (and so on, to infinity).
- Relation - all things are changed as their relations become changed, or as we look upon them from different points of view.
- Assumption - the truth asserted is merely a hypothesis or assumption.
- Circularity - the truth asserted involves a vicious circle (Hankinson, 1995).

A great deal of the history of early Christian philosophy may be seen as an attempt to superimpose Christianity over Greek and Roman philosophical methods which were based on Skepticism and probable knowledge. That is why early Christian thinkers such as St. Augustine and Boethius adapted the epistemological traditions of Greece and Rome to

demonstrate that one could in fact arrive at certain knowledge at least in matters of Christian religion.

David Hume, one of the British Empiricists, claimed that "a wise man, therefore, proportions his belief to the evidence", which provided the basis for the maxim of Marcello Truzzi (1935 - 2003) that "Extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof", much later in the 20th Century (Hankinson, 1995:78). Hume argued that even the most basic beliefs about the natural world, or even in the existence of the self, cannot be conclusively established by reason, but we accept them anyway because of their basis in instinct and custom.

IV Tenets of Skepticism

Instructively, skepticism has evolved considerably as a result of the writings of philosophers such as Agrippa the Sceptic and David Hume. Modern skepticism is premised on the following:

(a) Equal Opportunity for Doubt

Philosophical skepticism "attempts to render doubtful every member of a class of propositions that we think falls within our ken. One member of the class is not pitted against another" (Foster, 2008: 34). In a variety of cases, the veracity of one claim is not contingent on another. In other words, one claim should not merit more or less doubt than the other. In fact, skepticism regards as unwarranted assumption that there is enough evidence to remove doubt from any claim with entirety.

(b) Take Nothing for Granted

Skeptics, generally, hold that no unexamined piece of knowledge can be taken for granted, preferring instead to investigate, verify and, in many cases, dismiss commonly held beliefs. The epistemological skeptic would, as a matter of procedure, verify the truth and reliability of a claim, even and especially if the claim has a long history. In the course of their research, skeptics will often conclude that beliefs concerning the past or tradition are "not justified, or are not rational, or cannot constitute knowledge" (Foster, 2008: 36).

(c) Intellectual Caution

One major aspect of the tenets of philosophical skepticism is the value ascribed to doubt and prolonged inquiry. Indeed skeptics argue that it is impossible to know anything with absolute certainty. Knowing that they are equally not immune to error as humans, skeptics make no claims that their process of examining knowledge is infallible. Since knowledge surrounding a particular claim is suspect, skeptics would consider it safe to suspend judgment on the issue. It should, however, be noted that the degree of doubt does not necessarily render skeptics dubious or unrealistic to the point of being absurd.

V Christian Education through the Centuries

The holy prophets and apostles of biblical times are regarded as philosophers, but they differ from the ancient Greek philosophers in the sense that they received their visions/ inspirations directly from God, while the Greek sought for a way to reach the gods for same visions/ inspirations. Therefore, the document which emanated as a result of this divine encounter is called the Holy Scriptures, the infallible word of God—the textbook of textbooks on Christian education. Hence the subject of Christian education cannot be treated with the Bible in isolation. Thus Christian education began in the Garden of Eden with the Godhead as the teachers, the source of all truth. With this in mind it could be seen that the scope of the history of Christian education spans the whole breath of civilization (History of Christian Education, 2014).

The method used by the Creator in His Edenic school was teaching and learning. This method was the method that the history of education would ride on, with each succeeding generation seeking to pass on its culture, values, traditions, morality, religion and skills to the next generation. The passing of culture came to be known as enculturation and the learning of social values and behaviors as socialization (History of Christian Education, 2014).

Education began in a perfect environment, with perfect teachers, and perfect students; but then, imperfection marred the setting as a result of the Fall (Gen. 3:1ff). Ever since, the need for good teachers became apparent to train students in the line of truth because of the prospect of the forthcoming battle between secular education and Christian education (Holding Fast: Christian Education Across the Centuries, 2014).

Beyond the Garden of Eden and among the Jewish race as custodians of the holy oracle of God a system of education similar to that of the Eden was formed. First, there was a

home school where informal educational system of education was applied. In other words, “the education of the children takes place anytime, anyplace, without cost, as children and parents dialogue about a host of personal or religious educational topics” (Moreau, 2004:173). Example of such education was the early education of Moses. After he was miraculously saved by the God of his fathers through the hands of the princess of Egypt (Exo. 2:1-10), he was handed back to his God-fearing mother in whose hands he was properly educated (Ndjerareou, 2006). During the years between the exodus and Christ’s birth, Jewish children were required to receive their education at the synagogues where they studied mostly the Old Testament. Synagogues also offered a more advanced form of education; it was structured, staffed and planned and mainly for boys in a non-formal setting (Anthony, 2001). Example of such education in Israel was the schools of the prophets established in Gilga, Jericho, Kirath-jearin, Ramah, Samaria, and Bethel in the days of Samuel, Elijah, and Elisha. These schools were to equip Israel with

men qualified to act, in the fear of God, as leaders and counselors. . . . Samuel gathered companies of young men who were pious, intelligent and studious. These were called the sons of the prophets. The instructors were men not only versed in divine truth, but those who had themselves enjoyed communion with God, and had received the special endowment of His Spirit. They enjoyed the respect and confidence of the people, both for learning and piety (White, 1952:96).

In addition, the schools were to meet the growing evil, including the growing false teachings from the false philosophers. In the days of David and Solomon “these schools proved to be one of the most effective means in promoting that righteousness which ‘exalts a nation’ Prov. 14:34” (White, 2000:32).

The New Testament began with the ultimate image of divine teacher, Jesus Christ. He taught in public, in synagogues, and in the temple. Privately, he instructed his disciples (Buttrick, 1962). And before his accession he gave the church the Great Commission. To understand the Great Commission an exegesis of Matt 28:19-20 needs to be done. In Greek, the adjective “taught” could be used in two or three forms. First, *didaktos*, primarily, is used for what can be taught, of persons (John 6:45); of things “not in words which man’s wisdom teaches, but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual thing” (1 Cor 2:13). That is, the teaching is not done through human wisdom, but the Holy Spirit’s. Second, *theodidaktos* an example of its usage to indicate being taught by God: “for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another (1 Thess 4:9). While the missionaries had taught the converts to love one another, God had Himself been the Teacher” (Vine, 1996). The last one is the Greek verb

didaskô to give instruction (Matt 4:23; 9:35; 28:20; Rom 12:7; 1 Cor 4:17; 1 Tim 2:12) (Vine, 1996). However, when the two verses (19 and 20) are brought together they make the “training continuous, educating to new views of duty; new applications of old truths, new sensitiveness of conscience, unveiling to us, ever as we climb, new heights to which we aspire” (Maclaren, 1984).

During the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church had great influence on education. As education became more and more available, it also became more and more secularized and the Bible lost its central place in most schools until the Reformation era, when John Wycliffe, William Tyndale, and others risked their lives to provide the common people with the Bible in their language and Luther insisted on a fundamentally Christian education with the Scriptures at the center. During the Catholic Counter-Reformation era in spite of the horrific persecution the Huguenots Christian faced, they did not relent in giving their children a solid Christian education. To inflict injury to the spread of “Protestantism through Christian schools, the Jesuits established their own schools to indoctrinate children with Catholicism. Across Europe, the Protestants were slowly ousted, and the Jesuits took over” (Holding Fast: Christian Education Across the Centuries, 2014). It was the Roman Catholic missionaries that first brought Christian education and doctrines to Nigeria, but coated with traditions and unbiblical philosophy.

(a) Christian Core Values

Organizational core values are those values, principles or standards that serve as the foundation of which the organization perform its work and conduct itself. A Christian institution might have a host of core values but some of them could be so primary, so important to the institution that would keep the institution on track in an ever-changing society, government, politics, and technology. In other words in an ever-changing world, core values are constant. Such core values underlie the institution’s work, how the personnel interact with each other, and which strategies it employs to fulfill its mission (What are Core Values? 2015).

Babcock University as a case study of faith-based Christian university has core values that guide its conduct and mission. These core values are excellence, integrity, accountability, servant leadership, team spirit, autonomy and responsibility, and Adventist heritage. The basic question is, how could those core values be made to keep the institution on track in an

ever-changing world, in a world that truth is not constant? The one important place to look at is the curricular.

(b) The Place of Values in Curricular Planning

An educational institution is known by its curriculum and its core values should be tailored to reflect the curriculum. Pazmino (1997) opines that a curriculum expresses values in relation to those understandings, attitudes, skills, and conducts chosen to share with students. Once Christians, in Christian institution, identify the core values in education that are consistent with a Christian world view it is their duty to reflect those values in curricular planning and teaching. These duties are fourfold and call for biblical accountability in the practice of Christian education to serve as shield against wrong philosophy.

The first duty is to own and live out the values they profess. This is a call to honesty in curricular decision-making and planning. For example, if Babcock University upholds the value of integrity in the lives of teachers and students who are created in God's image, the university must adapt its teaching methods to enable students to learn and apply this truth in their daily lives as God's commandment. The second point is that the obligation in curricular planning can be noted. In order for the institution to live out its core values, it must translate its values into the purposes and goals of the curriculum (Pazmino, 1997). For instance, if the institutions affirmed Adventist heritage as part of its core values —“The Lord our Righteousness” (Jeremiah 33:16), “the Holy Scriptures are the infallible revelation of His will . . . the authoritative revealer of doctrines” and “the Sabbath for all people as a memorial of Creation” (White, 1973:94, 281), she is duty bound to help students to think Adventist heritage in any aspect of study.

In addition, it implies integrating these values in different areas of God's truth as revealed in the Bible. Also, “love and truth must be balanced. In the curriculum, this implies the need to teach the truth and encourage students to love the truth. It also implies “the necessity of encouraging love between teachers and students and among students” (Pazmino, 1997:235). The third obligation calls for the need to pursue values in everyday life, in the home, the church, and community. Finally, the curriculum should constantly be reviewed. The world is dynamic, and change and transformation are realities to consider and plan for in developing any curriculum. Without flexibility and adaptability in curriculum planning the curriculum would be outdated (Pazmino, 1997:235) In doing this truth must be seen as universal and unchangeable.

(c) The Role of Faith

Through inspiration Apostle Paul defined faith as “the substance of things hoped for, and the sign that the things not seen are true” (Hebrews 11:1 BBE), those things are true because they are promised by God who is Truth (John 14:6, cf. Deu. 32:4) and the Source of all truth (White, 1911).

There is a distinction between beliefs and faith. Faith is deeper than beliefs; faith goes with loyalty and trust which can be expressed in several areas. First, is a devotion to those philosophies or beings that are much valued, and such are called the center of value. To Christians the center of value is the unchangeable God. Secondly, there is the loyalty to power center in a person’s life. For example, a family member or bank account that gives one a sense of security. The last but not the least is a devotion to a “master story” that gives direction and hope in one’s life such as fellow devotees who shared the same values (Anthony, 2001).

(d) Stages of Faith

There are six stages in the development of faith as argued by Fowler. If at the early stage faith is properly maintained with the right education in a child, that child will grow to have firm foundation in the unchangeable truth of God that would lead him in his life journey. The foundation of Fowler’s six stages of faith development is called Primal or Undifferentiated Faith. This stage begins at birth to three years and is shaped by experiences of love and care by primary caregivers—parents and other adults. At this point seeds of faith are sown (Anthony, 2001). Care should be taken at this foundational stage to sow the seed of faith in the living God.

The first stage is called Intuitive-Projective Faith. From two to seven years the child goes through this stage. During this stage imagination develops from the stories, symbols, etc., life-time powerful faith images created, and moral emotions emerge. In addition, the child’s understanding of God takes shape influenced by experiences with parents, teachers, pastors, etc.

The second stage is Mythical-Literal Faith, eight to eleven years. At this stage the child begins to take the stories, beliefs, and practices of his or her community to comparing

them with those learned in the early state. The difference between reality and fantasy is made, right and wrong behavior is made and consequences for each are known.

The third stage takes place between twelve and twenty-two years and is called Synthetic-Conventional Faith. The child can at this point use abstract ideas to determine meaning in life. He can see himself now as others see him. Relationships play an important role in shaping faith.

The fourth is Individuative-Reflective: this happens during the young adulthood period. The most important thing at this stage is the thoughtful examination, even questioning, that leads to reshaping earlier understandings of faith. In addition, personal ownership of faith emerges.

The fifth staged is Conjunctive Faith, which occurs at middle adulthood and beyond and it comes with deeper interest for relationships. Faith can be examined from many perspectives simultaneously. At this stage in life grows a commitment to justice for others of various ages, and races.

The final stage is Universalizing Faith. It is a stage where “deep sense of being firmly rooted in the Transcendent, the ultimate conditions of existence of God, develops. There is increase openness to truth in all faiths (Anthony, 2001:83).

VI Skepticism and Faith

Thomas Jefferson wrote, “Question with boldness even the existence of God...” (Peikoff, 1982: 106). In modern society, skeptics question the existence of God and the faith of believers. They portray the Bible as errant, untrustworthy and irrelevant. Secular science has become the dominating worldview and Christians who do not conform to the theories of evolution and the Big Bang are mocked publicly. Moral relativism ridicules the notion of absolute right or wrong and regards it as absurd. Added to this is the influence of secular society with its own peculiar definition of tolerance that detests the Bible as the one true word of God. Christians, however, regularly engage in conversations with skeptics as a way of defending their faith “...contend for the faith that was delivered to the saints once for all” (Jude 1:3).

Quite instructive is Bill Foster’s engagement with the skeptic’s worldview:

Generally speaking, a person’s total worldview consists of how they see the world in three broad categories: SPIRITUAL, MORAL, and

SCIENTIFIC. These three areas represent life's big questions such as: What happens after we die? (Spiritual); Are right and wrong absolute? (Moral); How did life come about? (Scientific)... The fourth kind is BIBLICAL. The Bible is the lens through which believers view the other three categories. Although skeptics do not use the Bible to shape their worldview or to guide their life, most will give an opinion about it when given the opportunity (Foster, 2008: 23).

Some similarities are discernible in these four forms of skepticism; the focus are alike because they are all about discussions of overarching ideas and concepts, not on factual evidence. Spiritual skeptics question the existence and nature of God, moral skeptics question whether or not there are moral absolutes, scientific skeptics discuss evolutionary and secular ideas, and biblical skeptics fight the Bible on the basis that it is not relevant and has no authority in the lives of believers. Skeptics', operating from a naturalistic philosophical perspective, denigrates faith and try to prove that there is no God of the Bible, and that Christ is not the only way to God. However, each form of skepticism focuses on a different aspect of philosophy. Spiritual skeptics focus on questions about general spirituality and the supernatural and do not discuss any one religion, while biblical skeptics question the Bible and Christianity specifically. Moral skeptics focus only on morals and right and wrong, while scientific skeptics attempt to explain reason without mentioning faith or values. Though different in many ways, one common thread runs through them - denying the existence and authority of God or of his word.

The skeptics' doubt about knowledge claims seems to be in tandem with the assertion that "human reason can never grasp reality itself" (D'Souza, 2007:173). Indeed D'Souza referenced the philosophical postulations of Immanuel Kant, perhaps the most influential philosopher in modern history, when he stated that "Kant's accomplishment was to unmask the intellectual pretension of the Enlightenment: that reason and science are the only routes to reality and truth" (D'Souza, 2007:178). By so doing D'Souza has attempted to argue on the atheists' own terms, that is, on the terms of reason, science, and evidence. What he has succeeded in demonstrating is that one need not accept Christianity on blind faith; one can accept it based on the facts. But on what facts – facts provided by reason alone? It is hardly so, because our senses and our minds provide us only with a distorted picture of reality, not reality itself.

Again, referring to Kant, the philosopher, D'Souza (2007: 172) points out that "we have no basis to assume that our perception of reality ever resembles reality itself. Our

experience of things can never penetrate to things as they really are. That reality remains permanently hidden to us.” What is quite obvious, but sometimes denied, is that humans see things in a limited and distorted way. It is almost impossible to ascertain reality because it does not come directly to us but is ‘filtered’ through a lens that we ourselves provide. No wonder Paul says “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (1 Cor. 13: 12). If humans see or understand in part now it is reasonable not to put too much confidence in reason since it is incapable of grasping all the facts.

VII Conclusion

Skepticism as a philosophical approach to knowledge and truth hardly meshes with the *raison d’être* for the establishment of faith-based institutions in Nigeria and indeed all over the world. Pilate had asked Jesus a pertinent question when he was interrogating him after his arrest. He queried: “What is truth?” (John 18:38). Unfortunately Pilate did not wait for a response, perhaps preferring to leave the answer to speculations. That has not helped matters, because it has led to many claims to true knowledge using human intellect alone.

Philosophical skeptics, on the other hand, have gravitated to the other extreme of the pendulum by claiming that truth is not discoverable until every decipherable evidence is brought to bear which the human intellect must analyze before drawing conclusions. Where this is not immediately possible the skeptic’s approach is to suspend judgment or otherwise doubt the knowledge claim. This way of reasoning may appear to be a sound basis for ascertaining truth in any given situation. After all, is it not myopic for anyone to accept at face value every knowledge claim?

However, it is all together a different thing and indeed pernicious to the philosophical basis for the establishment faith-based higher institutions if all knowledge claims must be ascertained through the prism of doubt. Christianity is a faith-based religion because it recognizes the limitations of the human intellect in grasping reality. Critical intellect can only grab that which is empirical but there is more to reality than that which is defined by the empirical. As rightly pointed out by Linnemann (1990:108) “revelation is inconceivable to critical intellect.” Christianity also recognizes verities as found in the Holy Writ. The failure of philosophical skepticism is the deification of reason. In which case what reason is not able to decipher must be left in suspense.

Specifically, for Christian institutions, truth is discoverable not necessarily by suspending judgment on all matters. What this means is that faith-based higher institutions in Nigeria do not need to jettison faith in order to remain relevant. Revelatory knowledge as inscribed in the Bible is equally valid in the quest for truth. Indeed, it provides the bedrock in the search for truth. Jesus declares: “Thy word is truth” (John 17:17). The word of God provides the basis for other truth-seeking. Because of its revelatory nature it may not always fit into the mold of empiricism or circumscribed by the strictures of pure reason. When the issue at stake is revelatory doubt may not be a virtue. In fact, when critical reasoning employs doubt as a tool to ascertain the veracity of faith-based assertions it can only succeed in obfuscating the truth and thus leads to a crisis of conflicting values.

A purely secular orientation in the educational enterprise may after all be dealing with reality that is partial. For education to meet its divine purpose it needs to recognize that God is at the center of true knowledge and anything short of that realization will eventually prove a disservice to the cause of true education. Poe (2004:181) insightfully remarks: “Our culture traded truth for facts and in the end discovered that it had neither.” In fact, faith is not an inferior form of knowledge. Rightly conceived, it is an umbrella that encapsulates the totality of human knowledge. It is epistemological bigotry to regard every piece of knowledge with doubt.

The failure to recognize truth in all its facets (including the spiritual or faith dimension), has made it look like a mythological concept in recent times. Then it is easy to relativize truth, making it lose its potency. Within the domain of experience, human reason is sovereign, but it is in no way unreasonable to believe things on faith that simply cannot be proven empirically. The future of faith-based higher institutions of learning is bleak if faith is consigned to the peripheral or totally repudiated in the educational enterprise. It cannot be otherwise since education that is not anchored on divine imperatives is like a rudderless ship broken off its moorings.

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