UNIT 2: ARGUMENTS FOR SCEPTICISM

UNIT STRUCTURE

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2. 1. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- define Scepticism;
- discuss skepticism is a philosophical position on the possibility of knowledge;
- discuss arguments for skepticism.
- Explain skepticism plays a pivotal role towards acquiring certain knowledge;
- discuss various sense and applications of skepticism;

2.2. INTRODUCTION

Skepticism (from the Greek *skeptesthai*, 'to examine') is the philosophical view that it is impossible to know anything with absolute certainty, or to know the world as it 'really' is. The word can also mean a general reluctance to accept anything on face value without sufficient proof. Skeptics may be taken to be denying the possibility of empirical knowledge.

2.3. SCEPTICISM IS A PHILOSOPHICAL METHOD

A. J. Ayer in his book *The Problem of Knowledge* has developed a Chapter entitled Scepticism and Certainty. It shows that skepticism is required for the quest for certainty. Skepticism is required or needed in every sphere of knowledge claim. In the ordinary sense, this concept is taken into account in negative sense. However, there is no point of denying the fact that every man in some sense or other is skeptic. However in the domain of philosophy, particularly, in the branch of the theory of knowledge or epistemology, the concept of skepticism plays a pivotal role towards acquiring certain knowledge. Keeping this in mind, it can still be said that in Western philosophy the attitude of doubting knowledge claims set forth in various areas. Skeptics in various ways have challenged the adequacy or reliability of knowledge claims by asking what principles they are based upon or what they actually establish. Skeptics also have questioned whether some such claims really are the alleged indubitable or necessarily true. They have equally challenged the alleged rational grounds of accepted assumptions in everyday life. Although in everyday life everyone is skeptic in some sense or other about some knowledge claims, but philosophical skeptics have doubted the possibility of any knowledge beyond that of the contents of directly felt experience. The point of contention of this unit is to show and establish arguments for skepticism. In this regard, it would be claimed that skepticism is no longer a negative concept or negative method to deny knowledge claims, rather it should be taken up as a philosophical method through which one may quest *the philosophical certainty of knowledge*.

2.4. DEVELOPMENT OF SKEPTICISM

Ironically, skeptics from ancient times onward had developed arguments to undermine the contentions of dogmatic philosophers. Philosophy was full of dogmas on the basis of which one may derive or claim knowledge. As a result of that skeptical arguments and their employment against various forms of dogmatism had played an important role in shaping both the problems and the solutions offered in the course of Western philosophy. As ancient philosophy and science developed doubts arose about various basic widely accepted beliefs about the world in ancient times, skeptics challenged the claims of Plato and Aristotle. During Renaissance similar challenges were raised against the claims of Scholasticism and Calvinism. In the 17th century skeptics attacked Cartesianism established by the French philosopher and mathematician Rene Descartes along with other theories that attempted to justify the scientific revolution initiated by Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo. Subsequently, a skeptical offensive was leveled against the Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant and then against idealist philosopher Hegel. Each challenge led to new attempts to resolve the skeptical difficulties. This clearly reflects that philosophical arguments for skepticism is not something new, it was strongly visible from the antiquity and it had played a pivotal role towards developing certain and incorrigible knowledge.



ACTIVITY 2.1

Is every man in some sense or other skeptic? Give reason in support of your answer.

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"Philosophy was full of dogmas on the basis of which one may derive or claim knowledge." Explain.

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.....



CHECH YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: From which Greek word 'Skepticism' is derived?

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Q 2: Who wrote the book, *The Problem of Knowledge?*

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Q 3: Is it true that philosophical skeptics have doubted the possibility of any knowledge?

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Q 4: When skeptics attacked Cartesianism?

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Q 5: What do you generally mean by Skepticism?

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2.5. DIFFERENT SENSE AND APPLICATIONS OF SKEPTICISM

There are various sense and applications of skepticism with regard to various philosophical disciplines through which people claimed to have certain knowledge. Skepticism raised serious questions about the certainty of knowledge about metaphysics, ethics, and religious beliefs. David Hume seemed to show that no knowledge can be gained beyond the world of experience and that one cannot discover the real causes of experienced phenomena. Any attempt to do so, as Kant argued, leads to antinomies or contradictory knowledge claims. However, a dominant form of skepticism concerns knowledge in general questioning whether anything actually can be known with complete or adequate certainty. This is called *epistemological skepticism* or skepticism pertaining to the theory of knowledge. Thus, when we discuss about skepticism, it is in general pertaining to epistemology. However, there are various kinds of epistemological skepticism differentiated in terms of the area in which doubts are raised. Again, forms of skepticism

can also be distinguished in terms of the motivation of the skeptic – whether he is challenging views for ideological reasons or for pragmatic or practical ones in order to attain certain psychological goals.

2.6. ACADEMIC SKEPTICISM AND PYRRHONISM IN ANCIENT PERIOD

The first kind of skepticism appeared and developed in the Academy, the school founded by Plato and it was known as 'Academic skepticism'. It set forth a series of epistemological arguments to show that nothing could be known challenging primarily what were then the two foremost schools Stoicism and Epicureanism. They denied that any criteria could be found for distinguishing the true from the false instead only reasonable or probable standard could be established. The other major form of ancient skepticism was **Pyrrhonism** apparently developed by medical skeptics in Alexandria. It adhered to the view that nothing could be known and that some things are more probable than others. To settle any disagreement a criterion seems to be required. Any purported criterion, however, would have to base either on another criterion or on itself. Sextus offered arguments to challenge any claims of dogmatic philosophers to know more than what is evident. Sextus said that his argument were aimed at leading people to a state of a taraxia where people who thought that they could know reality were constantly disturbed and frustrated. If they could lead to suspend judgment, they would find peace in mind. In this state of suspension they would neither affirm nor deny the possibility of knowledge but would remain peaceful and still waiting to see what might develop. The Pyrrhonist did not become inactive in the state of suspense but lived un-dogmatically accepting to appearances, customs and natural inclinations.

2.7. SKEPTICISM AFTER RENE DESCARTES

After academic skepticism developed in ancient period, subsequently, there developed medieval skepticism, modern skepticism, the famous Catesianism in the 17th century, the skepticism of David Hume

in the 18th Century. Rene Descartes actually offered a fundamental refutation of the new skepticism which claimed that by applying the skeptical method of doubting all beliefs that could possibly be false, one could discover a truth that is genuinely indubitable- namely, 'I think; therefore I am' (*cogito ergo-sum*). From this truth one could discover the criterion of true knowledge – namely, that whatever is *clearly and distinctly* conceived is true. Using this criterion, one could then establish a number of truths that God exists that he is not a deceiver, that he guarantees the veracity of clear and distinct ideas and that an external world exists that can be known through mathematical physics. Thus, Descartes starting from skepticism claimed to have found a new basis for certitude and for knowledge of reality. Throughout the 17th century, skeptical critics sought to show that Descartes had not succeeded and that if he sincerely followed his skeptical method his new system could only lead to complete skepticism. They challenged whether the *cogito* proved anything and whether it was indubitable, whether Descartes's method could be successfully applied and whether it was certain and whether any of the knowledge claimed of Cartesianism was really true. Nicolas Malebranche, the developer of occasionalism, revised the Cartesian system to meet skeptical attacks only to find his efforts challenged by the new skeptical criticisms of Foucher and others. Various English philosophers, such as John Locke, tried to blunt the force of skepticism by appealing to common sense and to the 'reasonable' person's inability to doubt everything. They admitted that there might not be sufficient evidence to support knowledge claims extending beyond immediate experience. But this did not actually require that everything be doubted by using standards of common sense.

2.8. HUME'S SKEPTICISM

In the 18th century David Hume asserted that neither inductive nor deductive evidence was establish the truth of any matter of fact. Knowledge can consist of intuitively obvious matters or demonstrable relations of ideas but not of anything beyond experience. The mind can discover no necessary

connections within experience or any root cause of experience. Beliefs about the world are based not upon reason or evidence or even upon appeal to the uniformity of nature but only on habit and custom. For Hume, beliefs cannot be justified. Belief that there is an external world, a self and a God is common, but there is no adequate evidence for it. Although it is natural to hold these convictions, they are so to speak inconsistent and epistemologically dubious. Hume further upheld that 'philosophy would render us entirely Pyrrhonian'. The beliefs that a person is forced to hold enable him to describe the world scientifically but when he tries to justify them he is led to complete skepticism. However, nature brings him back to common sense to unjustifiable beliefs. Thus, Hume's fideism was a natural rather than a religious one. It is only animal faith that provides relief from complete doubt. We find the radical skepticism in Condorcet who held that mathematics, physics and moral philosophies were all merely probable. He also raised the possibility that mental faculties by which people judge their knowledge might change over time and hence that what is judged true today might not be judged true tomorrow.

It seems that the central themes in Hume's skeptical analysis – the basis of induction and causality, knowledge of the external world and the self proofs of the existence of God – became the key issue of later philosophy. Hume's contemporary Thomas Reid hoped to rebut Hume's skepticism by exposing it as the logical conclusion of the basic assumptions of modern philosophy from Descartes onward. Such disastrous assumptions, he urged, should be abandoned for commonsensical principles that have to be believed. Although Kant thought that he had answered the challenge of skepticism, some of his contemporaries saw his philosophy as commencing a new skeptical era. Schulze, a notable critic of Kantianism, insisted that on Kant's theory no one could know any objective truths about anything. He could only know the subjective necessity of his own views. Even some critic contended that though there are such things as a priori concepts, their application to experience is always problematical and whether they apply can be determined only through

experience itself. Hence the possibility of knowledge can never be established with certainty. Assured truth on the basis of concepts is possible only of human creations like mathematical ideas and it is questionable whether these have any objective truth. Another Kant critic Harman saw in Hume's and Kant's work a new basis for fideism. If knowledge of reality cannot be gained by rational means then one must turn to faith.

2.9. IRRATIONAL SKEPTICISM

In the 19th century, irrational skepticism was developed into existentialism, a school of philosophy that emphasizes the concrete and problematic character of human existence. Using traditional skeptical themes to attack Hegelianism and liberal Christianity, Soren Kierkegaard stressed the need of faith. Only by an unjustified and unjustifiable *leap into faith* could certainly be found – which would then be entirely subjective rather than objective. Subsequent theologians influenced by existentialism argued that the challenge of skepticism highlights humanity's inability to find any ultimate truth except through faith and commitment. Non-religious forms of this view were developed in the 20th century by existentialist's writers such as Sartre and Albert Camus both of whom combined the epistemological skepticism of Kierkegaard with the religious and ethical skepticism of Friedrich Nietzsche. The rational and scientific examination of the world shows it to be unintelligible and absurd and if 'God is dead' as Nietzsche proclaimed then the world is ultimately meaningless.

2.10. NATURALISTIC SKEPTICISM

Besides the above, other kinds of skepticism appeared in various schools of modern and contemporary philosophy. The English idealist F. H. Bradley used classical skeptical arguments in his *Appearance and Reality: A Metaphysical Essay* (1893) to argue that the world cannot be understood empirically or materialistically. For Bradley, true knowledge can be reached only by transcending the world of appearance. There also developed naturalistic skepticism which stated that any interpretation of immediate or

intuited experience is open to question. It developed an argument by saying that in order to make life meaningful; people interpret their experience on the basis of 'animal faith' according to biological and social factors. The resulting beliefs though unjustified and perhaps illusory, enable them to preserve and to find meaning in their lives.

2.11. PHILOSOPHICAL SKEPTICISM AND LOGICAL POSITIVISM

The development of skepticism continued even in the 20thcentury logical positivism and linguistic philosophy. The attack on speculative metaphysics incorporated skepticism about the possibility of gaining knowledge of anything other than mere logical tautologies. Russell and the important philosopher of science Karl Proper further stressed the un-justifiability of the principle of induction and Popper criticized theories of knowledge based upon empirical verification. Fritz Mauthner, a founder of linguistic analysis, set forth a skepticism according to which there are no objective connections between language and the world. Word meaning in a language is relative to its users and thus subjective. Every attempt to determine what is true leads back to linguistic formulations, but not to objective state of affairs. The result is a complete skepticism about reality – a sort of reality that cannot even be expressed except in terms of what Mauthner called godless mystical contemplation. We think Mauthner's linguistic skepticism bears some affinities to be expressed in Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921). Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (TLP) was completely skeptical about the possibility of religious language and religious experience, ethics, theology, and metaphysics. In view of this, he drew the limits of language as well as the limits of world (reality) and then said that anything that would lie beyond the limits of language as well as the limits of the world would be nonsensical. Before Wittgenstein, a different way of dealing with skepticism was set forth by the Cambridge philosopher G. E. Moore. He contended skeptical arguments cannot undermine the certain knowledge that people have of basic proposition such as 'the Earth has existed for a long time'. This kind

of certain knowledge can serve as a foundation for other knowledge claims, even though there may be some highly unusual circumstances in which it could be questioned. Wittgenstein in his later work *On Certainty* (posthumously published in 1969) explored this kind of resolution though he rejected Moore's characterization of that which is certain as a kind of knowledge. For Wittgenstein, 'certainty lay in the ways in which human beings act-in their forms of life'. Contemporary philosophers continue to argue about what constitutes knowledge and whether there can be kind of certain knowledge that is immune to skeptical doubt.

Further a new radical form of skepticism emerged in the last half of the 20th century postmodernism. This view questioned whether there can be any rational objective framework for discussing intellectual problems, or whether instead the intellectual frameworks that people use are inherently determined by their life situations. Developing out of 20th century literary criticism and psychological theory postmodernism undermined confidence in the validity of any kind of human investigation of the world by showing that such an investigation itself would need to be investigated invoking ideas drawn from Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Rorty. Postmodernism saw philosophy and science merely as activities – to be judged in terms of their roles in or effects on human societies rather than by some transcendent standard of truth and falsehood. A general skepticism from seeing that there is no objective standpoint from which to compare or evaluate these different points of view. However, critics of postmodernism regarded it as confused and malicious because for them it seemed to imply a thoroughgoing epistemological relativism.

Even though the best way known to evaluate claims is to adopt the intellectual discipline of science and scientific methods of investigation, but this methodology must be adopting 'philosophic doubt' or 'skepticism'. Although all of the methods of science are important, practicing skepticism is crucial to protecting oneself from believing unsubstantiated claims. Skepticism is not a view that promotes the disbelief of every truth or claim, rather it has been defined as 'an attitude or doubt or a disposition to

incredulity either in general or towards a particular object'. It means 'inquirer' or 'investigator'. In a sense, skepticism is closer to the original Greek meaning as the suspension of judgment (either to adopt or reject) until sufficient evidence is examined. Thus, skeptical approach promotes the examiner or the skeptic to seek 'when feasible, adequate evidence and reasonable grounds for any claim to truth in any context'. Thus, if there is a particular treatment for which valid scientific evidence has been drawn, that treatment should be adopted and viewed as evidenced-based. However, when a claim is not supported by evidence or when the evidence is weak and of poor validity, rejecting the claim or position is wise. Since epistemological knowledge or certainty is evidential on the basis of which incorrigible or indubitable knowledge can be gained, the evidence must be fulfilled on the basis of truth, belief and justification. Thus, truth, belief and justification conditions have been treated as the necessary and sufficient conditions for epistemological knowledge. It has been developed by the classical epistemologists. Simplistically, it can be said that skepticism is the position of objectively evaluating, by looking for empirical evidence, the validity of any claim of fact, and basing adopting or rejecting on the evidence. Normal Malcolm distinguishes between strong and weak sense of knowledge on the basis of the confidence of the knowledge claimer. According to Malcolm, weak sense of knowledge is nothing but belief. The incorrigibility of epistemological knowledge actually hinges on the strong sense of knowledge.

The skeptical attitude and the corresponding investigatory approach, reduces the possibility of adopting as true a claim or treatment that may not be true. As is often said, extraordinary claims could be true, but a skeptical approach towards them would require extraordinary evidence and evaluation of that evidence. To reiterate, a skeptical thinker does not reject all claims, nor does he accept all claims as true, rather the position of a skeptical thinker is one of assessing the validity of the evidence before rendering a decision. The type of evidence is important, and there is an acknowledgement that there exists quite a bit of variation and debate

regarding the evidence constitutes 'valid' evidence. However, there is general agreement that the methods and criteria used by science is the most acceptable perspective to take.

2.11.1 Philosophical And Scientific Skepticism

Thus, there develops two types of skepticism, viz., scientific skepticism and philosophical skepticism. Study and adopt the method of science, scientific investigation is the hallmark of scientific skepticism. It states that anyone who claims extraordinary evidence to substantiate those claims. Don't be gullible; do not accept claims without evaluation. Accepting all claims is not only intellectually dishonest, but potentially dangerous and fatal. Gullibility is the opposite of skepticism. Therefore, to demand evidence of truth will naturally protect one from being gullibly accepting every claim. In scientific skepticism, one has to keep an open mind just not so open that brain fall out. In other words, one has to be intellectually willing to accept any claim, but always seek evidence and proof of truth before acceptance is granted. Undoubtedly, skepticism is a key concept in understanding how to assess the level of believability of something. Everyone must seek the truth. This set of analytic and decision making procedures and rules allow us to ascertain what might be true and what does not have evidence of believability. In fact, the adoption of healthy skepticism will result in a more informed public, more informed decision making about claims and treatments, and have the overall effect of the promotion of truth and validity to protect us from extraordinary claims that have little reason to be believed.

2. 11. 2 A. J. Ayer's View

A. J. Ayer introduced the concept of **philosophical skepticism**. It calls in question is not the way in which we apply our standards of proof, but these standards themselves. However, not all questions have philosophical nature. The peculiarity of philosophical skepticism is that they are not in the way connected with experience. Philosophical skeptic is not concerned, as a scientist would be, with distinguishing the conditions in

which these sources are likely to fail those in which they are normally be trusted. The philosophical skeptic makes no such distinction regarding matters of fact like the scientific skeptic. Examining the entrails of birds or the question whether the failure to survive a trial by ordeal was a trustworthy indication of guilt is subject matter of scientific skepticism, but not the matter of philosophical skepticism. In this way Ayer makes the distinction between scientific and philosophical skepticism. Philosophical skepticism is not connected with experience. However, scientific skepticism is connected with experience. Philosophical skeptic casts doubt on those matters on which scientific knowledge hinges on.



ACTIVITY 2.2

- Is Descartes a supporter of skepticism? Explain briefly.

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- Do you find any gap between philosophical and scientific skepticism? Discuss.

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CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: Who is the founder of 'Academic skepticism'?

Q 7: Is Hume a skeptic?

Q 8: Name two books written by Wittgenstein.

Q 9: Define epistemological skepticism.

Q 10: What is Naturalistic Skeptic?



2.12 LET US SUM UP

- The above discussion makes it clear that skeptical doubt is global and is unsparing so far as the logical grounds of knowledge are concerned. That is why it is out of the question to reject skepticism.

- Skepticism is a philosophical position on the possibility of knowledge. Its interest is in viewing that knowledge is not possible or to show that we do not know what we believe we know. In this regard, it would be claimed that the skeptic's position is negative in that he asks the very standards of knowledge because he finds that all these standards can be questioned from a reasonable point of view.

- Although skeptic's position is negative, but philosophical skeptics have doubted the possibility of any knowledge beyond that of the contents of directly felt experience. This makes the sense to say that skepticism is no longer a negative method to deny knowledge claims, rather it should be taken up as a philosophical method through which one may quest the philosophical certainty of knowledge.



2.13 FURTHER READINGS

1) Ayer, A. J. 1958. *The Problem of Knowledge.* Macmillan, London: Penguin Books.

2) Ayer, A. J. 1940. *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge.* Macmillan, London: Penguin Books.

3) Bradley, F. H. 1930. *Appearance and Reality.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

4) Chakravarty, D. K. *Fundamental Questions of Epistemology and Metaphysics.*

5) Das, K. L. 2006. *Philosophical Relevance of Language.* New Delhi: Northern Book Centre.

6) Pradhan, R. C. 2001. *Recent Development in Analytic Philosophy.* New Delhi: ICPR.

7) Wittgenstein, L. 1961. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Trans. D. F. Pears and B. F.

8) McGuinness. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

9) Wittgenstein, L. 1974. *On Certainty.* Trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

2.14 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: *Skeptesthai*

Ans to Q No 2: A. J. Ayer.

Ans to Q No 3: True.

Ans to Q No 4: In the 17th century skeptics attacked Cartesianism.

Ans to Q No 5: Skepticism (from the Greek *skeptesthai*, 'to examine') is the philosophical view that it is impossible to know anything with absolute certainty, or to know the world as it 'really' is. The word can also mean a general reluctance to accept anything on face value without sufficient proof. Skeptics may be taken to be denying the possibility of empirical knowledge. In short, skepticism is a philosophical position on the possibility of knowledge. Its interest is in viewing that knowledge is not possible or to show that we do not know what we believe we know.

Ans to Q No 6: Plato.

Ans to Q No 7: Yes, Hume is a Skeptic.

Ans to Q No 8: *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus , Philosophical Investigations.*

Ans to Q No 9: A dominant form of skepticism concerns knowledge in general questioning whether anything actually can be known with complete or adequate certainty. This is called *epistemological skepticism* or skepticism pertaining to the theory of knowledge.

Ans to Q No 10: Naturalistic skepticism stated that any interpretation of immediate or intuited experience is open to question. It developed an argument by saying that in order to make life meaningful; people interpret their experience on the basis of 'animal faith' according to biological and social factors. The resulting beliefs though unjustified and perhaps illusory, enable them to preserve and to find meaning in their lives



2.15 MODEL QUESTIONS

A. Objective type questions

Q 1: What is philosophical skepticism?

Q 2: Is there any difference between *doubt* and *skepticism*?

Q 3: Who is the author of *On Certainty?*

Q 4: Who is the author of *The Problem of Knowledge*?

Q 5: Skepticism is a philosophical method through which one may quest the philosophical certainty of knowledge.–Is it true?

Q 6: What is meant by *cogito-ergo-sum*?

Q 7: Weak sense of knowledge is nothing but belief – who said this?

Q 8: 'Certainty lay in the ways in which human beings act-in their forms of life.' Who expressed this view?

Q 9: Name one Cambridge philosopher.

Q 10: Who introduced the concept of Philosophical Skepticism?

Q 11: Define *Irrational skepticism*.

Q 12: What is scientific skepticism?

B. Short type questions (Answer in about 100-150 words)

Q 1: Is Skepticism a philosophical method? Briefly Explain.

Q 3: Distinguish between Scientific and philosophical skepticism.

Q 4: Write a note on Pyrrhonism.

Q 5: "Skeptic's position is negative." Elucidate.

C) Long questions (Answer in about 300-500 words)

Q 1: Discuss briefly linguistic skepticism.

Q 2: What is Skepticism? Explain after Hume.

Q 3: Discuss various sense and applications of skepticism.

Q 4: Explain briefly philosophical skepticism.

Q 5: Explain and discuss arguments for skepticism.

Q 6: Discuss Hume's theory of skepticism.

Q 7: What is skepticism? What are its characteristics?

Q 8: What is philosophical skepticism? Explain different forms of skepticism.

Q 9: Explain and examine Scepticism after Descartes.

Q 10: Discuss briefly A. J. Ayer's view on philosophical Skepticism.

Q 11: What do positivists understand by skepticism? Explain philosophical Skepticism with special reference to positivism in the 20th century linguistic philosophy.

Q 12: Write an essay on the development of Skepticism.

Q 13: State and comment on philosophical Scepticism.

Q 14: Explain and examine Scepticism as a philosophical method.

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