

Certitude and Scepticism as Complementary in the Search for Knowledge

Abstract

This paper proposes that the demand for certainty and the continual raising of the doubts (scepticism) about our epistemic claims be seen and considered as efforts toward the same direction, namely, to attain knowledge. This has become necessary as the debate between certitude and scepticism in traditional western epistemology attends to the concept of certitude and scepticism as if they are exclusive and contradictory. This has left the revolving discussion in an endless debate. The search for certitude in our knowledge claims is to ensure that we have justification for our claims to knowledge and the skeptical considerations that over shadow our knowledge claims are equally demands that we have justification for our knowledge claims so that we do not treat mistaken opinions or lucky or educated guess as knowledge. The African theory of knowledge, which is built on African ontology that treats the divide between the object and subject as two aspects of the same reality, encourages this proposal. As such, this paper analyses and evaluates the debate between certitude and scepticism as we have it in traditional western and African epistemology, thus providing the grounds on which the proposal to consider certitude and scepticism as complementary in the search for knowledge.

Key Words

Certitude, Scepticism, African Epistemology, True knowledge, Reality

Bilgi Arayışında Tamamlayıcı Öğeler Olarak Kesinlik ve Şüphencilik

Özet

Bu makale, epistemik iddialarımıza yönelik kesinlik talebini ve şüphelerin sürekliliğe ortaya çıkışını, aynı yöne doğru yol olan, yani bilgi etmeye yönelik olan, çabalar olarak görülüp değerlendirilebileceğini ileri sürer. Geleneksel batı epistemolojisi içinde kesinlik ve şüphencilik arasındaki tartışma, kesinlik ve şüphencilik kavramlarına onlar sanki ayrıcalıklı ve tutarsızmış gibi baktığından, bu sözü

edilen değerlendirme zorunlu hale gelmiştir. Bu bakış, tartışmayı sonsuz bir münakaşaya bırakmıştır. Bilgimize yönelik kesinlik arayışı, bilgi iddialarımız için bir haklılandırmanın temin edilebileceğini ileri sürer ve bilgi iddialarımıza gölge düşüren şüpheci değerlendirmeler de, hatalı kanıların ya da şanslı ve eğitilmiş tahminleri bilgi olarak ele alamayacağımıza ilişkin bir bilgi iddiasının haklılandırılabilceğini eşit derecede savunur. Özne ve nesne arasındaki bölünmeyi, aynı gerçekliğin iki görünüşü olarak ele alan Afrika ontolojisi üzerinde kurulmuş olan Afrika epistemolojisi, bu öneriyi destekler. Bu makale, kesinlik ve şüphecilik arasındaki tartışmayı geleneksel batı ve Afrika epistemolojisinde olduğu gibi analiz etmekte ve değerlendirmektedir, böylece kesinliğin ve şüpheciliğin, bilginin arayışında tamamlayıcı öğeler olarak değerlendiren öneriyi temeller sağlayacaktır.

Anahtar Sözcükler

Kesinlik, Şüphecilik, Afrika Epistemolojisi, Hakiki Bilgi, Gerçeklik.

1.0 Introduction

The issue of epistemological certitude and scepticism has occupied the attention of epistemologists for ages. Both have been treated as contradicting each other and efforts have been on to establish epistemic claims (knowledge) that are free of sceptical considerations. The issue of scepticism and certitude is centered on the question of whether we actually know what we claim to know. This question is a demand for what justifies our knowledge claims against the doubts that such knowledge claims may not be true or certain. As simple as the question sounds, it requires answers to the following:

- (i) How true (certain) are our epistemic claims?
- (ii) Can these claims be justified in the face of epistemological doubts?
- (iii) What degree of certainty do these claims require to pass as knowledge?

1.1 Understanding the Problem

Traditional Western epistemology sees the mind as a mirror of nature and conceives knowledge as the accurate representation of nature. As Rorty (1979) describes it; knowledge is seen as accuracy of internal representation of external objects. This means that if we understand how the mind works to construct its representations, then we will understand how knowledge is possible and the nature of knowledge.

This has become an imperative for epistemology since the time of Descartes, whose primary epistemological effort was to defend human knowledge against scepticism. He sought unshakable foundations for human knowledge through clear and distinct ideas. Within the Cartesian scheme, knowledge is simply consciousness replicating the world. For Descartes, “to know is to accurately represent the world outside the mind.” (Jimoh,1999). This Cartesian notion dominated the efforts of

epistemologists to present an accurate conception of knowledge throughout the modern era of Western philosophy.

Philosophers like John Locke and Immanuel Kant furthered this notion and evolved an epistemological tradition that attempts to set universal and objective standards of rationality. Very prominent in this tradition is the underlining distinction between the known object and the knowing subject. Thus, our epistemic claims are justified when the knowing subject accurately represents the known object. This reveals the influence of a dualistic conception of reality in which there is a distinction between the object and the subject. This dualistic conception of reality is characteristic of traditional Western analytic philosophy, ditto; epistemology.

In these efforts to find unshakable foundations for knowledge, traditional Western epistemology has treated certitude and scepticism as concepts that are exclusive and contradictory. Thus, one is seen as opposed to the other. So the efforts have been towards defeating scepticism so as to establish the certainty of our epistemic claims. Against this idea, this paper seeks to bring both concepts together as mutually complementary in the common search for certain knowledge. By certain knowledge, we mean epistemic claims that are not necessarily beyond doubt (sceptical considerations), but epistemic claims that are more warranted than the doubts.

A closer study of the African approach to reality reveals that though the African acknowledges the dualism of the physical and spiritual, both are interwoven in a continuum of existence, such that there is no sharp distinction between the subject and the object. This metaphysical conception of reality plays a significant role in the African understanding and expression of reality as exposed in African epistemology. Thus, we have an African theory of knowledge that does not have the running battle between doubt and certitude as we have in traditional Western epistemology.

1.2 Clarification of Concepts

For a better understanding of this paper, there is need for a clarification of key terms like (i) scepticism, and (ii) certitude, as used in this study.

1.2.1 Scepticism

The idea of finding unshakable foundation for knowledge is against scepticism, which claims that we cannot be certain about our epistemic claims. "Scepticism as an idea connotes the critical spirit: the tendency of not being easily satisfied with simple or superficial evidence and striving to accept only incorrigible beliefs that are absolutely certain." (Owolabi, 2000). It is usually not easy to describe the features of scepticism since there are diverse and different reasons and objectives that prompt sceptical denial of certainty and objectivity of our epistemic claims. One sure thing however is that the aim of scepticism is to establish the need to properly scrutinize our epistemic claims to ensure that our epistemic claims are free from doubt. To this end, scepticism has been the force propelling the epistemological enterprise. According A. J. Ayer, "these sceptical challenges ... supply the main subject matter for what is called theory of

knowledge; and different philosophical standpoints are characterized by the acceptance or denial of different stages of the sceptic's argument." (Ayer, 1956). We may therefore describe scepticism as the epistemological doctrine that challenges our cognitive claims by providing arguments and reasons why those cognitive claims should be doubted.

There are variations in the arguments of the sceptics; these variations include:

- (i) The doubt of epistemic claims based on the source of knowledge. Most of our knowledge claims come from the sense experience and the senses have been shown to be deceitful and cannot be reliable guide to knowledge of the future.
- (ii) The doubt directed at theoretical knowledge as some sceptics argue that we can easily make mistakes in our deductive and mathematical inferences. This only shows we cannot be sure of the inferences we make from mathematical axioms.
- (iii) The doubts that arise from the similarity between actual reality and states of dream. Since it is always difficult to differentiate between these two, some sceptics argue that it is only sensible to regard our experiences as a dream from which we can wake up one day. Thus, we should not take actual experiences as absolutely certain.
- (iv) The doubts prompted by the Cartesian "evil genius" hypothesis. According to Descartes, it is possible for us to be constantly deceived by an "evil genius." If this is the case, it would mean that all our knowledge are deceitful and unreliable. (Owolabi, 2000).

Based on these variations in sceptical arguments, M. A. Slote summarizes the essential thesis of scepticism as; "by scepticism about X (where X could mean any empirical claim) I shall mean or view that some hypothesis about X is no less reasonable than its deniable, which means that there is no more reason to believe that X exists than that X does not exist and that it is consequently unreasonable to believe that X exists." (Slote, 1970).

Inherent in this understanding of Slote is the idea that scepticism is oriented towards the belief that our epistemic claims are not justifiable as a result of some natural problems about our interaction with the external world. (Owolabi, 2000). This understanding points at the very heart of the problem of certitude and scepticism in traditional Western epistemology, namely, the idea that until the knowing subject accurately represents the known object as it is in the eternal world, we cannot talk about knowledge. Thus, rational certainty, which guarantees knowledge, is understood within the parameters of accuracy of representation by the knowing subject.

1.2.2 Certitude

It is problematic to provide an account of certainty, but the fact also remains that without such an account, we cannot understand the position of the sceptic concerning the attainability of knowledge. We can conceive certainty from the subjective point; that is to see certainty as a subjective assurance or a psychological indubitability. This is a situation in which the knowing subject is unable to conceive the possibility of a contrary

position. Note that this does not eliminate the possibility of a contrary position; the case may be that the knowing subject is not aware of any other belief that contradicts or is contrary to the known belief. Hence, it is subjective. This is the kind of certainty in the Cartesian "*cogito ego sum*" which Descartes erroneously thought was also logically indubitable. Contrary to this Ludwig Wittgenstein argued that;

...one does not infer how things are from one's own certainty. Certainty is, as it were, a tone of voice in which one declares how things are but one does not infer from the tone of voice that one is justified. (Wittgenstein, 1969).

Certainty as subjective indubitability is obviously not the kind of certainty epistemological discourse is interested in with regard to the definition of knowledge. We therefore need to consider another account of certainty. According to J. A. Bewaji,

...this other account of certainty derives from an acceptance of what John Dewey has called the "spectator theory of knowledge." From the perspective of this theory, only what is completely fixed and immutable can be certain or real. (Bewaji, 2007).

This is the kind of certainty that is associated with logical necessity. By logical necessity, we mean internal relationship of propositions, a denial of which will involve a contradiction. Examples of this account of certainty would be mathematical statements and logical inferences; they are logically necessary and analytic and they are not dependent on experience for their truth. Based on the understanding of logical or absolute certainty, the certainty of our knowledge claims would be purely internal to the object of study or claim and propositions deriving from it. (Bewaji, 2007). From whatever point of view we consider that which is certain, it is clear "that certainty is human, linguistic, epistemic, pragmatic and even cultural." (Bewaji, 2007).

1.3 A Review of Certitude and Scepticism In Traditional Western and African Epistemology

The traditional Western approach to epistemology is foundational. From the time of Descartes, the opinion that the theory of knowledge should be grounded on real, firm, and unshakable foundations has persisted. Thus, there was a relentless search for a method to ground the foundations of knowledge. Descartes thought he found this method in his systematic doubt, while Kant thought it is in the distinction between the *numenon* and *phenomenon*. For Edmund Husserl, he felt this method is to be found in phenomenology. (Dummet, 1978).

Richard Rorty summarizes this approach to epistemology when he asserts that modern Western philosophy understands the foundations of knowledge and finds these foundations in the study of;

man-as-knower of the 'mental processes' or the 'activity of representation' which make knowing possible. To know is to represent accurately what is outside the mind, so to understand the possibility and

the nature of knowledge is to understand the way in which the mind is able to construct such representations. (Rorty, 1979).

The traditional Western dualistic conception of reality that distinguishes between the known object and the knowing subject projects the problem of certitude and scepticism. Such a notion of reality divides the world into two – the objective world and the subjective world. This division has assumed different forms of discussion in the history of Western epistemology, e.g. the appearance and reality discourse, the materialism and idealism discourse, the rationalism and empiricism discourse, etc. Discussions in traditional Western epistemology have proceeded along these lines until more recently when post modernist epistemology introduced the context-dependency dimension of viewing justification.

African epistemology differs from the traditional Western conception of knowledge and follows the same line of argument as post modernist epistemology. The claim of African epistemology is a claim to a unique way of knowing that is distinctively African. Protagonists of this claim intend to direct attention to the cultural embeddedness of knowledge. (Udefi in Akanmidu, ed. 2005). It is a known fact that culture plays an important role in our mental understanding of reality. So an understanding of a peoples' culture enables a better understanding of how they conceive and express their beliefs about the realities around them. It is within this context we understand the position of "professional philosophers like Senghor, Anyanwu, Onyewuanyi, and others who argue that there is a distinctive African way of perceiving and reacting to the world." (Udefi in Akanmidu, 2005). They present African epistemology as the way the African understands, interprets and apprehends reality within the context of the African cultural experience. (Onyewuanyi, 1976 and Anyanwu, 1983.).

The African understanding of reality is tied to its metaphysics. Metaphysics here refers to concerns about the meaning and nature of ultimate reality. Africans uphold a dualistic conception of reality in the sense that they see existence as partly physical and partly spiritual. According to A. Ekanola, "they accept the reality and the intrinsic interrelationship of both a sensible (perceptible and physical) and a nonsensible (non-perceptible and spiritual) aspect of reality." (Ekanola in Oladipo, ed. 2006). Ekanola was quick to note that "traditional Africans generally do not attempt any rigid compartmentalization of the world. Rather they construe the two aspects as interlocking and having a continuous and reciprocal influence on each other." This view has been expressed by scholars like Chinua Achebe in his "Chi in Igbo Cosmology" (Achebe in Eze, ed. 1988), Gyekye (1987) and Gbadegesin (1981).

The importance of this point is that it underlines the difference between traditional Western epistemology and African epistemology. While the African concept of reality sees existence as both physical and spiritual, it nonetheless does not propose a dualistic understanding of reality. African metaphysics considers both the physical and spiritual realms as equally real and as constituting a continuum. In this continuum, there is "the possibility of the spiritual entities and at least some physical entities, especially human beings, migrating at will between the physical and the non-physical realms." (Ekanola in Oladipo, 2006). This explains the epistemological monism we find in

African epistemology. According to Udefi, this monism “does not draw a sharp line of demarcation between the epistemic subject who experiences and the epistemic object that is being experienced.” (Udefi in Akanmidu, 2005).

Thus, the African perceives and knows by reacting to the known object in a sensuous, emotive, and intuitive process, as well as through the process of abstraction. African cosmology is more encompassing. The African does not remove himself from the object to be known but fuses his particular subjective orientation and rhythm with the object and the knowing subject and the known object become one. K. C. Anyanwu expresses this point lucidly by saying;

the African maintains that there can be no knowledge of reality if an individual detaches himself from it. Bear in mind that for the African, a life-force, is not a passive spectator of the universe but an active participator of life-events. So he operates with the logic of aesthetics which holds that the whole is real. Knowledge therefore comes from the co-operation of all human faculties and experiences. He sees, feels, imagines, reasons or thinks and intuits all at the same time. Only through this method does he claim to have the knowledge of the other. So, the method through which the African arrives at trustworthy knowledge of reality ... is intuitive and personal experience. (Ruch and Anyanwu, 1981).

Uduigwomen comments on Anyanwu’s submission by acknowledging the wholismholism expressed in this submission as well as acknowledging the fact that it is replete with philosophical problems but nonetheless, it “solves the problem of duality inherent in Western epistemology.” (Uduigwomen, 1995). That Anyanwu’s position goes with philosophical problems does not; in my own opinion reduce the import of its claim as virtually all philosophical theories have their inherent problems and negations. This is precisely the issue epistemological certitude and scepticism attempts to resolve.

1.4 Critical Evaluation

For a claim to be epistemic, that is, for a claim to be described as knowledge, it has to meet certain criteria or standards. These standards include truth, belief, and justification. Thus, traditional Western epistemology defined knowledge as justified true belief. By this definition, it means all knowledge claims must be true, we must believe them to be true, and we must be justified in believing that they are true.

For decades, this was the operative definition of knowledge but Gettier’s influential essay of 1963 refuted this conception of knowledge, suggesting that the conditions of truth, belief and justification are not sufficient for knowledge. This challenge raised the view that we may need additional condition or conditions for knowledge. It is a challenge that calls to question the justification of our knowledge claims; ensuring that we do not take a true belief resulting from epistemic luck or an educated guess as knowledge.

Over four decades after Gettier, Western analytic philosophers are still struggling either to defend the traditional account of knowledge or to respond to the issue raised in Gettier's essay. The discussions have been mainly attempts to repair the traditional account of knowledge. The attempts fall easily into four categories. The first category suggests that "the definition of knowledge should clearly indicate that the constituents' belief should not be inferred from a false belief." (Owolabi, 2000). It is a suggestion that proposes the inclusion of a fourth condition for knowledge. This fourth condition requires that "the believer's ground for believing a claim does not include a false belief." In summary, it is the elimination of "relevant falsehood." (Clarke, 1963). Many philosophers did not welcome this suggestion as it was too strong and makes impossible the possibility to have knowledge. (Pollock, 1981).

The second category of attempt is found in the work of Lehrer and Paxon (1969). It is also a suggestion for a fourth condition. In this case, the fourth condition should not allow within its system of beliefs truths which will destroy the believer's justification. (Dancy, 1985). It is called the "defeasibility approach." This approach is closely related to the third category of attempts referred to as the "reliable method" approach. It argues for a fourth condition, namely that our justified, true, beliefs would pass as knowledge if they are derived from a reliable method. (Dancy, 1985). The fourth category of attempts centres on the "conclusive reason" approach. It argues that justified true belief can still be knowledge as long as it is based on conclusive reason. Conclusive reason means that a particular proposition is knowledge if and only if the reasons that make it an epistemic claim are conclusive. They are conclusive on the grounds that they cannot be true while the conclusion is false.

The debate has largely been to revamp the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge. This involves:

- (i) Making a proper distinction between knowledge and belief.
- (ii) Giving a better and more comprehensive analysis of justification to see what it entails and what it does not entail.
- (iii) How best to deduce from given propositions.
- (iv) How to differentiate between first-person and third-person knowledge.

The debate has been between epistemological rivals competing for whose conception of knowledge is correct and whose conception is not correct. Right at the heart of the debate is what degree of certainty we have that gives justification to our epistemic claims in such a way that they are immune to scepticism.

Traditional Western epistemology talks about the 'world as it is' and the 'world as it appears to us.' The 'world as it appears to us' represents the world we can know. This conception of reality has created the fertile grounds for the perennial debate on epistemological certitude and scepticism in traditional Western epistemology. For as long as we cannot know the world as it is, scepticism will always cast a shadow on whatever we claim to know.

On the contrary, African epistemology which is firmly rooted in African ontology considers both the physical and the spiritual as intrinsically related as two aspects of the same reality; they interlock and constitute a continuum with a reciprocal

influence on each other. (Ekanola in Oladipo, 2006). Within this context, the subject knows the object as part and parcel of the same reality to which both of them are aspects. The subject acquires knowledge of the object by seeing and thinking, as well as experiencing and discovering reality. The self of the subject is united with the objective world outside the self in a relationship in which the self of the subject vivifies and animates the objective world. This unitary conception of reality affords the African epistemologists the luxury of combining a representative realist view of the world with the common sense argument against scepticism. Scepticism is therefore not an issue of contention in African epistemology.

1.5 Recommendation

Epistemological efforts in the history of Western epistemology have had to battle with scepticism by trying to create firm and unshakable foundations for knowledge. Analysis of the various efforts in this direction takes you through concepts like foundationalism; the theory that “inferential justification terminates with beliefs that are immediately justified, beliefs that do not depend on any other beliefs for their justifications.” (Moser and VanderNat, 1987). Other concepts in relation to the understanding of knowledge are; (i) Coherentism; the idea that beliefs as justified to the extent that they fit in or cohere with other beliefs in a given system of beliefs (Cardinal, Hayward, & Jones, 2004). Thus, maintain that justification is a function of some relationship between beliefs in contrast to the idea of privileged beliefs holding up a superstructure in the way maintained by the foundationalist. (ii) Contextualism; the idea that whatever we know is relative to a context. Context is seen in relation to certain features like, intentions and presuppositions of the members of a conversational situation. (iii) Reliabilism; the argument that a reliable method would produce a true belief and thus a belief is justified if it is produced by a reliable method rather than basing it on good reasons. And (iv) the Context-dependency approach of the post modernist to justification, which conceives knowledge as a special kind of relations; a text or discourse that puts words and images together in ways that is pleasing and useful to particular culture. It therefore denies objective knowledge, arguing that knowledge is made from the linguistic and other meaning making resources of a particular culture.

What you find at the end of this analysis is that none of these adequately put to rest the over bearing considerations of scepticism. This situation is worsened by the sceptic’s demand for absolute certainty as a *conditio sine qua non* for knowledge. Absolute certainty means indubitability, which necessarily includes both objective and subjective indubitability.

The problem of certitude and scepticism continues to elude traditional Western epistemology because of its dichotomy between the subject and the object in the understanding of reality. Within this understanding, the subject needs to perceive the object as it is to be able to make a cognitive claim. Such perception is not possible. The Kantian theory of the *nomenon* and *phenomenon*, as the world as we know it and the world as it is in itself, which exemplifies the submission of traditional Western epistemology shows that we can only know the world as it appears to us, and not as it is in itself.

The post modernist approach which disagrees with universal standards and paradigms of rationality and objectivity for epistemic claims conceives knowledge and rational certainty within the context of social agreements, thus giving the notion of knowledge as a human activity. Within this context, justification is context-dependent. The brave and persuasive efforts of the post modernists however leave loopholes which critiques of the position have maximally explored and continue to explore. This makes it impossible for them to put the problem of epistemological certitude and scepticism to rest.

An appraisal of the epistemological approach of African philosophy to knowledge and rational certainty first and foremost, opens up the cultural embeddedness of knowledge; therefore revealing the important role that culture plays in the mental understanding of reality. (Brown, 2004). The African ontological understanding of reality as a basic continuum in which the dual aspects of reality; the physical and the spiritual are intrinsically interrelated in such a way that it does not allow a rigid compartmentalization of the object and the subject as two separate and different entities, enables the cognition of reality as part and parcel of itself and not as “accurate representations.” Thus, knowledge is not the knowing subject accurately representing the known object, but that the knowing subject knows the known object as part and parcel of its very being in one and the same reality. In this way the issue of “accurate representation” or no “accurate representation” does arise.

Another very important aspect that this kind of understanding reveals is the various influences on the subject’s understanding of the object. Since it is not by a process of abstraction alone that the subject gets to know the object, such influences that arise from its human and socio-cultural being, i.e. habits, interests, values, language, etc. come into play. These cannot be denied of the subject because they shape his understanding, appreciation and interpretation of reality. (Aigbodioh, 1997).

With all these put together, can we say that the African epistemologist does not understand such concepts as certainty and doubt or certitude and scepticism? He certainly does understand these concepts; but not as the traditional Western epistemologist does in relation to knowledge. Both concepts for the African epistemologist are mutually complementary in the understanding of knowledge rather than mutually exclusive. They both play the role of ensuring that we are not mistaken in our knowledge claims. Instead of one being a paradigm and another being the obstacle to evaluating what is to be knowledge and what is not to be knowledge, both ensure that we sift the candidates for epistemic claims properly of all that could mislead the knower.

The efforts by epistemologists to establish true knowledge is to guide against misinformation. This is to avoid complications and misdirection in our decision making processes and interpersonal relationships. To ask questions about the certitude of our epistemic claims, which amounts to raising doubts (scepticism) about such claims is to ask us to be sure of the knowledge claims we are making. On the other hand, to draw standards of certainty by which we assess our knowledge claims is to be sure of the claims are making. Thus, in either case, the aim is to avoid making mistakes in our

epistemic claims. The quest for certitude and the efforts to avoid scepticism serve as check and balance for epistemological claims.

1.6 Conclusion

Philosophy as a discipline thrives in continual questioning with the noble aim of understanding the realities of our world better. Every question raised provides the opportunity for a further research or inquiry into the subject of the question. In this way, it builds up the body of our knowledge. The idea of this paper is not to settle once and for all the discussion on epistemological certitude and scepticism but to direct attention to an aspect of the issue that is yet to be given considerable attention. This is the fact that the search for certainty and the continuous questioning of scepticism are not albatross to the quest for knowledge. If keenly intensely considered, both certitude and scepticism work for the same purpose; namely, to establish knowledge as opposed to mistaken beliefs, lucky or educated guess. To establish that doubt and certitude are complementary in the search for true knowledge.

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