

SKEPTICISM

By Mark Paynter

Blanchard traces the origins of Skepticism back to ancient Greek philosophy and in particular Pyrrho (C. 360-270 B.C). At the heart of Pyrrho 's thinking was the view that man is unable to know the true nature of the world or how it was formed. Pyrrho believed that inner peace could be achieved from suspending judgment on questions that pertained to logic, metaphysics, morality and behavior.

David Hume (1711-1776) during his lifetime was known as a historian but now history looks back on him as the greatest British philosopher of his age. Hume's work built upon the foundation laid by John Locke and ushered in the age of skepticism. Blanchard writes

“Hume's thinking and writing covered vast areas of human knowledge. With regard to religion, he believed it had evolved from polytheism to monotheism, and he mounted a strong attack on traditional arguments to the existence of God. Like Locke, he was an empiricist; strongly opposing the idea that one could demonstrate the existence of God by human reason or sense experience. His rejection of the principle of causality (the law of cause and effect) led him to disregard the whole idea of God as a First Cause, as well as the argument that the world's beauty, order and complexity proved the existence of a divine designer. He did not deny that the universe had a cause, the issue for Hume was whether anything could be known about it.”¹

Countless people are today influenced by Hume's thinking without even being conscious of his influence. One of the traditional Christian arguments for God's existence is inferred from the fact that we observe effects these effects must have a cause. That cause is said by Christians to be God. David Hume denied this. “David Hume said that we never actually observe (experience) causality (what causes something that happens), we cannot know for certain that any particular cause and effect are connected...He denied that we can know the truth about a cause from an effect.”²

Central to Hume's thinking concerning skepticism were the ideas that

- 1 There are two ways of acquiring knowledge either through the observation of observable facts or the reflection of ideas.
- 2 Causality cannot be observed but only believed.³

¹ Blanchard page 51

² McDowell page 627

³ McDowell page 628

The impact of skepticism upon society can be seen in the following quotation from Blanchard.

“There is a glory about “not knowing”. A high premium is placed on the absence of conviction and open-mindedness has become synonymous with intellectual sophistication...Skepticism says that nothing can be known with complete certainty, and that the only sensible thing is neither to affirm nor deny anything. Even when faced with the massive implications of the issue, the skeptic adopts the popular political phrase and says, “I am ruling nothing in and I am ruling nothing out...”

The skeptic...makes the bold claim that he alone has a clear picture, in which the truth is that no truth is knowable. Yet this makes the skeptic every bit as dogmatic as the theist (or for that matter, the atheist). He is a believer; he is convinced that we know nothing about God. But surely nobody can ever know that he can know nothing about God? After all, the skeptic can hardly shelter behind the principle that the burden of proof lies with the theist, because the burden of proof is always on the one who believes any idea- and the skeptic is a believer.”⁴

It is obvious that the skeptic lands up defeating his own argument because by the mere fact that he claims that nothing is knowable asserts that it is impossible to know that anything is not knowable and hence it is impossible to know that skepticism is true.

McDowell responses to skepticism by stating

- 1 Skepticism is ultimately a self- defeating argument because one inevitably has to ask do skeptics advocate that we should be skeptic of skepticism itself?⁵
- 2 Acquiring knowledge is a matter not only of observing facts or reflecting on ideas but also reflecting on the observable facts and seeking to connect the observable facts into some system of knowledge.
- 3 To accept Hume’s radical skepticism would be to accept that there is no connection between observable events.⁶

Warren Weirsbe uses Ecclesiastes 6: 7 to show that in this life there is a particular kind of person who continually requires answers to all of life’s questions. Unfortunately I am one of them. The danger for such a person is that their honest inquiry can very easily give rise to scepticism. Such a

⁴Blanchard page 35

⁵ McDowell page 629

⁶ McDowell page 632

person does well to heed Solomon's advice that "There are some questions about life that nobody can answer. But our ignorance must not be used as an excuse for skepticism or unbelief. Instead, our ignorance should encourage us to have faith in God. After all, we don't live on explanations; we live on promises."⁷

Warren Weirsbe argues that the Church must rise to the challenges of the Skeptic. The Skeptic is unlikely to be won by verbal arguments but by a demonstration of the living power of God in an individual's life and that of the wider Christian community. However the Church has not vigorously pursued this approach. Instead the church has become like the Society around it. "In fact, the church is so much like the world that the world takes little notice of what we do. We imitate the world's methods; we cater to the world's appetites; we solicit the world's approval; and we measure what we do according to the world's standards. Is it any wonder that we don't gain the world's respect?"⁸ If we are going to rise to the challenge of skepticism then we must learn to live victoriously. A victorious Christian is one who knows

"The promises of God, because they spend time meditating on God's Word (1:8); they *believe* the promises of God, because the Word of God generates faith in their hearts (Rom. 10:17); and they *reckon* on these promises and obey what God tells them to do. To "reckon" means to count as true in your life what God says about you in His Word⁹

⁷Wiersbe, W. W. 1996, c1990. *Be satisfied* (Ec 6:10). Victor Books: Wheaton, Ill. Ecclesiastes 6:10

⁸Wiersbe, W. W. 1996, c1993. *Be strong* (Jos 6:1). Victor Books: Wheaton, IL Joshua 6:1

⁹Wiersbe, W. W. 1996, c1993. *Be strong* (Jos 6:1). Victor Books: Wheaton, IL Joshua 6:1