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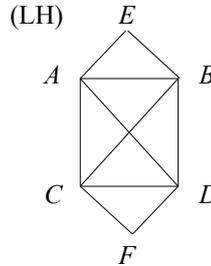
A NOTE ON SCEPTICISM

Scepticism is often accused of being inconsistent or self-refuting. My aim in this note is to show that this opinion is unjustified. This, however, does not mean that scepticism itself is true or justified. But the two problems, namely that of the consistency of scepticism and that of its material soundness, have to be sharply distinguished.

To begin with my problem, the first one, let me quote a classical statement: "The natural result of any investigation is that the investigators either discover the object of search or deny that it is discoverable and confess it to be inapprehensible or persist in their search. So, too, with regard to the objects investigated by philosophy, this is probably why some have claimed to have discovered the truth, others have asserted that it cannot be apprehended, while others again go on inquiring. Those who believe they have discovered it are the 'Dogmatists,' specially so called - Aristotle, for example, and Epicurus and the Stoics and certain others; Cleitomachus and Carneades and other Academics treat it as inapprehensible: the Sceptics keep on searching."¹

What is difficult when we come to an interpretation of this passage concerns 'the truth', particularly how to understand the definite article in this expression. Arne Naess proposes to read it as 'at least one truth'. And he writes: "Those of them who investigate matters systematically eventually become philosophers. As such they fall into one of the following three main classes: those who claim that they have found at least one truth, those who claim that truth *cannot* be found in any matter, and those who neither claim that they have found at least one truth nor claim to *know* that truth cannot be found, but persist in their seeking. These three groups are respectively called the Dogmatists, the Academicians and the Sceptics. (The first two are also called dogmatic in a wider sense.)"² Naess' reading of Sextus may be justified by logical analysis. Its base is the so called

logical hexagon (a generalization of the logical square) which can be shown by a diagram:



Provided that $E =_{df} A \vee B$ and $F =_{df} C \wedge D$, we have *i.a.* the following logical theorems:

- (1) $A \rightarrow C$
- (2) $B \rightarrow D$
- (3) $A \rightarrow E$
- (4) $B \rightarrow E$
- (5) $\neg(A \wedge B)$
- (6) $C \vee D$
- (7) $F \rightarrow C$
- (8) $F \rightarrow D$
- (9) $\neg(A \leftrightarrow D)$
- (10) $\neg(C \leftrightarrow B)$
- (11) $A \vee B \vee F$

The most popular interpretation of (LH) is that involving the so-called categorical sentences. However, we also have a family of modal (in the extended sense) interpretations. One of them is to be obtained by putting 'I assert that p ' for A . Then B means 'I assert that $\neg p$ ', C - 'It is not the case that I assert p ', E - 'I assert that p or I assert that $\neg p$ ', F - 'It is not the case that I assert p and it is not the case that I assert $\neg p$ '. Now let us start with the Academician. He says that no truth is to be found. His view can be expressed by a sentence (made by himself - and hence 'I')

- (12) I assert that no truth is to be found

which is an instance of B . The Dogmatist's position is then recorded by the following instance of A :

- (13) I assert that at least one truth is to be found

At this point we reach a small success in our logical analysis of Dogmatism and Academism, because we immediately note that the Dogmatist's confession cannot be obtained by putting 'all', 'any', 'every' or 'each' in place of 'at least'; the sentences which serve as arguments of the prefix 'I assert' in the mentioned views must be mutual negations. This is exactly the

1. Sextus Empiricus: *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. translated by R.G. Bury, London 1933, I, 1-4.
 2. Naess, A.: *Scepticism*. London 1968, p.4.

case when we use ‘at least one truth is to be found’ and ‘no truth is to be found’, but not when the former is contrasted with ‘all (any, every, each) truth(s) are (is) to be found’. If the Dogmatist would prefix a general statement by ‘I assert’, the Academician’s position could not be expressed at all. So, the Dogmatist, to be fair to the Academic colleague, should be moderate in his epistemic claims.³ The Sceptic can state his view by

- (14) It is not the case that I assert that at least one truth is to be found and it is not the case that I assert that no truth is to be found

Since this sentence is an instance of *F*, the Sceptic’s view is perfectly consistent, even if the positions of his enemies are inconsistent. Moreover, in virtue of (11), Dogmatism, Academism, and Scepticism exhaust all possible answers to the question ‘Is there at least one truth to be found?’ modulo asserting. The restriction ‘modulo asserting’ is important, because

all parties of the controversy can weaken their position by replacing ‘I assert’ with ‘I guess’. At this point, perhaps, we should change the names of the competing views. (In general, the names ‘Dogmatist’ and ‘Academician’ are rather opaque for most contemporary readers.) Let us retain the label ‘Scepticism’ and introduce ‘Optimism’ for ‘Dogmatism’ and ‘Pessimism’ for ‘Academism’. Now, the arguments of the Sceptic against Optimism and Pessimism modulo guessing seem much less convincing than in the case in which they are directed towards the constructions modulo asserting. But this is another story. I hope that my analysis shows an interesting application of elementary logic in philosophy. I do not claim that this analysis solves the principle question ‘Is there at least one truth to be found?’ However, I claim that the situation is now at least a little bit clearer than before. In particular, you can now state further questions, e.g., ‘Is asserting (guessing) that *p*, reasonable without believing that *p* can be true?’⁴

3. The sentences (3) and (4) explain why the Dogmatist and the Academician belong to the same family of Dogmatists in the wider sense.

4. I would like to thank Alexander Hieke for saving me from a serious logical error concerning the logic of guessing and for other help in preparing this paper.