INTRODUCTION

Scepticism has a long history. It started in Greek philosophy especially in the philosophy of Pyrrho. Afterwards scepticism appeared in the medieval times and then in modern philosophy. Even in the contemporary times scepticism is a dominant trend in philosophy. Thus scepticism as a philosophical school is entrenched in the history of Western Philosophy.

The present study is a study of the limits of scepticism. It aims at showing that certainty is the foundation of all human thought and knowledge. Though the method of doubt has been universally acknowledged as a method of inquiry after Descartes, it has never been accepted that philosophy can only doubt and never presuppose any certainty and necessity in human knowledge. In the history of philosophy the debate between the sceptics and the non-sceptics is a very interesting one. While the sceptics challenge and question the very certainty of human knowledge, the non-sceptics try to prove that there are absolutely true beliefs underlying our knowledge of the world.

It has been my effort in this essay to develop the argument of the sceptics in the historical perspective from Pyrrho to Hume and after. My effort here is to take scepticism in its strongest form and to see if, as a philosophical position, it can hold good at all. Besides, I have taken the greatest epistemologists of all times like Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, Russell and A.J. Ayer to show that scepticism has been defeated in many ways. The philosophers other than the sceptics have come to recognize that human knowledge is possible and that there are foundational principles underlying human knowledge.

Scepticism has many forms such as epistemological, moral, religious and so on. But it is the epistemological scepticism which is the most fundamental and the most serious. Therefore I have taken epistemological scepticism for a critical study. The
known sceptics in philosophy like Pyrrho, Hume and others have been concerned with epistemological scepticism. Epistemological scepticism questions all beliefs that mankind entertains about the world. That is why we have to take scepticism regarding these beliefs to be the most challenging one.

In chapter I entitled “The Nature of Scepticism: The Transition from Pyrrho to Hume”, I have discussed the historical development of scepticism from the ancient Greek times till Hume. In section one I have developed the different sceptic positions within the Greek tradition. Obviously Pyrrho is the greatest Greek sceptic. He laid the foundations of scepticism for all time to come. He believed that there is nothing that man can be sure of. Everything is doubtful, uncertain and impermanent. Therefore, he believed that the ultimate aim of philosophy is to liberate man from confusion and ignorance. In section two I have discussed Descartes’ delineation of the sceptical position in terms of his ‘dream argument’ and the ‘demon argument’. Though not a sceptic, Descartes could introduce scepticism as an alternative standpoint which questions the very foundations of our knowledge of the world. In the dream argument he shows that we cannot be sure whether we are at the moment dreaming or not. The sceptic refuses to believe that we are not dreaming. The demon argument adds further that our so-called knowledge claims about the world could be a matter of the Demon’s projections and manipulations. Therefore, our claims to knowledge are nothing but false beliefs which we entertain under the influence of the malignant Demon. In the final section I have discussed Hume’s scepticism which is a continuation of the Cartesian dream argument. Hume believes that there is nothing certain in human knowledge. Everything is a matter of a chance and probability. Hume rejected the rationalists’ dogma that human knowledge is founded on universal and necessary principles. Thus he established the Pyrrhonian argument that in knowledge there is no rational validity and everything goes as a matter of practical convenience.
In chapter II entitled "Possibility of Knowledge: The Rationalist and Empiricist Models, I have discussed predominantly the two epistemological models, namely rationalism and empiricism. Under the rationalist model I have discussed the arguments of Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz. They argue that human knowledge is possible and that there are self-evident and necessary principles underlying human knowledge. Descartes' *Cogito* argument is the first non-sceptical argument to establish that the self of the doubter exists self-evidently. Spinoza develops a more objective deductive argument to show that human knowledge is based on self-evident principles derived from human reason. For Spinoza, everything in our knowledge is deductively valid and therefore the question of certainty of human knowledge goes without saying. Leibniz further adds that all knowledge, mathematical as well as empirical, is innate to human mind. Leibniz's famous distinction between necessary and contingent truths makes the rationalist model the most acceptable and dependable.

Under the empiricist model I have discussed the way Locke, Berkeley and Hume have discussed the possibility of human knowledge. Locke, Berkeley and Hume were defenders of empirical sciences. Therefore, they all accepted that the human mind has access to the empirical world through our sense experience. Hume, both Locke and Berkeley believe that human reason in collaboration with sense-experience is sufficient to establish human knowledge. Thus we find a refutation of scepticism even within empiricism, because empiricists themselves accept some sort of certainty in human knowledge.

It is Kant who brings out the underlying necessity and certainty of human knowledge within his transcendental and critical model of philosophy. Kant has shown that both rationalism and empiricism are viable arguments against scepticism and that they genuinely arrive at the certainty which we require in knowledge, though in quite different ways. Kant, however, shows the limitations of both rationalism and
empiricism by arguing that there is a superior way of arriving at certainty by a
transcendental understanding of the structure of human reason.

In chapter III entitled “Logical Necessity and Scepticism” I have discussed the
nature of necessary truths and their place in the system of human knowledge. Leibniz’s
notion of necessary truths as different from the contingent truths was further developed
by Kant. The notion of necessity thus has been the most interesting notion in rationalist
and empiricist epistemology. The truths of mathematics and logic are held in high
esteem by both rationalists and empiricists. We are indebted to Leibniz for making the
necessary truths of mathematics the cornerstone of logic and epistemology. He has
shown that the logically necessary truths are also metaphysically necessary because even
God cannot violate them in creating the world. Thus the Leibnizian concept of necessity
has given rise not only to Kant’s transcendental necessity but also to the latter-day
concept of necessity in the possible world semantics of Kripke. However, the
Leibnizian tradition was challenged by Hume, the positivists and by Quine. Hume has
reduced the Leibnizian necessary truths into matters of relations of ideas and thus
truisms of our logical thought. The positivists further added that these truths are nothing
but linguistic conventions. Though Quine rejects the positivist distinction between
analytic and synthetic truths, he, like the positivists, doesn’t accept that there is anything
metaphysical about the necessary truths. He puts the necessary and the contingent truths
wit in the same system of human knowledge and accords them a central place in that
system. Quine thus rejects Leibniz and opens up a new way of understanding necessity
without its theologico-metaphysical background. It is, however, Kripke who brings out
a new metaphysical notion of necessity underlying our common beliefs like ‘Water is
H₂O in terms of his notion of rigid designation.

In this way the philosophers defending necessary truths have clearly shown that
there are truths in knowledge which are necessary, self-evident and a priori. Especially
the truths of mathematics and logic belong to this category. Even the demon argument of the sceptics cannot reject these truths. There are truths of reason which no thinking human being can give up.

In chapter IV entitled "Quest for Empirical Certainty," I have discussed the notion of empirical certainty as demonstrated in the philosophy of Russell, Moore, Price, A.J. Ayer, Austin and Strawson. The notion of sense-data has been introduced into philosophy by Russell and Moore in order to refute the sceptics' challenge to our knowledge of the external world. Russell has claimed that in knowing the objects of the world we know with certainty the sense data. The sentences expressing our sense-data are incorrigible and beyond doubt. Therefore, Russell pleads that even when we can doubt the external objects we cannot doubt the sense-data. Moore, following Russell, adds that it is the sense-data that give us the absolutely true knowledge about the world. In his "Proof of an External World" Moore argues that our access to the world in our sense-experience cannot but be guaranteed with certainty. The sense-data that we have are sufficient to prove that there are objects independently of our mind.

The argument from sense-data is carried further by Price, A.J. Ayer and others. The argument has been further strengthened to show that the language of sense-datum is the primary language on which is dependent the language of physical objects. The vast network of scientific language is derived from the basic language of sense-datum. A. J. Ayer has defended against Austin that there is a primary language of the phenomenal kind. We cannot do away with this primary language even if we admit that there are physical objects which are central to our conceptual system. The protocol language of the logical positivists is another version of this primary language Strawson goes further in claiming that our language of physical objects is superior in many ways to the language of sense-datum. Though he does not disown sense-data, he finds it more congenial to accept that physical objects are central to our conceptual system.
In this way one finds that the empiricist notion of certainty is as much rooted in the epistemological tradition as the notion of logical necessity. If something is empirically certain in our knowledge then scepticism cannot be true. The dream argument of the sceptic can never succeed in proving that we are all the while dreaming while experiencing the external world. We can always prove that we perceive the external world through our sense-organs.

In the fifth and final chapter entitled “The Limits of Scepticism: Moore and Wittgenstein against the Sceptic”, I have discussed specifically the arguments developed by Moore and Wittgenstein against the sceptic. In contemporary times Moore and Wittgenstein have argued against scepticism in a very serious and authentic way. Moore in his “A Defence of Common Sense” and “Proof of an External World” has argued that there are certain beliefs which all of us inherit from common sense. Such beliefs can never be sacrificed for the sake of other philosophical beliefs. These pre-theoretical beliefs constitute the frame of reference within which we can think at all; for example, we cannot think without accepting the truth of the belief that we are living on the planet Earth, or that we are having physical bodies. Therefore, there is an underlying certainty in these beliefs. This certainty can be defended, justified and proved, according to Moore.

Wittgenstein while commenting on Moore finds that while Moore is right in his criticism of scepticism, yet his defence of common sense is philosophically unwarranted and logically vacuous. It is because, according to Wittgenstein, common sense needs no defence and the external world needs no proof. The fact that our commonsensical beliefs are true is evidenced in our language and actions. The fact that we use language presupposes that there is a world with which language is related. No proof is needed to show that there is a world we are talking about. We are already in the world. Similarly,
our other empirical beliefs are so much a part of language-games and our forms of life that we cannot doubt any of them. Thus Wittgenstein’s criticism goes to prove that there is no epistemological refutation of scepticism because it will lead us into an infinite regress. The only solution is to come back to language and forms of life to show that scepticism is out of place. Scepticism is necessarily rooted out, once we see the basic structure of our thought and language. This argument may be called the grammatical argument in defence of the necessary truths in knowledge and language.

To conclude, scepticism as a philosophical position becomes irrelevant and absurd when it questions the very grounds on which we stand. A sceptic cuts the branch on which he himself stands. Therefore, it is necessary to realise that the sceptic must limit his doubting only within the commonly accepted conceptual structure.