

LEVELLING THE ANALYSIS OF KNOWLEDGE VIA METHODOLOGICAL SCEPTICISM

William A. BRANT

ABSTRACT: In this essay I provide one methodology that yields the level of analysis of an alleged knowledge-claim under investigation via its relations to varying gradations of scepticism. Each proposed knowledge-claim possesses a specified relationship with: (i) a globally sceptical argument; (ii) the least sceptical but successful argument that casts it into doubt; and (iii) the most sceptical yet unsuccessful argument, which is conceivably hypothesized to repudiate it but fails to do so. Yielding this specified set of relations, by means of proceeding from global scepticism to (ii) and (iii), increases the chances of identifying the highest evaluative relevancy of the levels of analysis and observation of an alleged knowledge-claim. I argue that the failure to analyse and derive a difference between (i) and (ii) with respect to an alleged knowledge-claim signifies that the claim is grounded within the theoretical framework itself, that the claim lacks specification with regard to content that is analysable via that framework, and the claim is dubious insofar as alternative theoretic frameworks may present greater relevancy to levels of observation.

KEYWORDS: knowledge, scepticism, perception, level of observation, magnification level, methodological scepticism

1. Gradations of Scepticism: from Global-types to Perceptual Scepticisms

Global scepticism is often considered a system of thought that utilises doubt so extensively that everything whatsoever is doubted, whereby the conclusion is formed that we do not and cannot know anything at all. Accordingly, we cannot even knowledgeably conclude that we do not know anything.

Contrarily, Ken Gemes¹ ascertains that it is generally presumed that "... it is logically possible that all one's experience-based beliefs are false. But for a typical agent this is simply not possible." For example, if one states both that "I have a left leg" and "It is not the case that my left leg is injured," then one of those statements must be true. Moreover, one may know that at least one of those statements is true, which appears to oppose global scepticism.

However, despite Gemes insight, global scepticism need not be defined more narrowly in order to express doubt with respect to any knowledge-claim or

¹ Ken Gemes, "A refutation of global scepticism," *Analysis* 69, 2 (2009): 218-219.

even every one of these claims altogether because the sceptic may still doubt the memories, expressions, attributions of modes and interpretations of them. Knowledge-claims also require more necessary conditions than experienced-based beliefs since no mere experience-based belief amounts to propositional knowledge. Globally sceptical hypotheses require that more necessary conditions be fulfilled than knowledge-claims do, which are claims that such hypotheses cast into suspicion. For these reasons I shall presume that globally sceptical arguments are inescapable.

Other types of sceptical arguments, such as varieties of perceptual scepticism, lack the intensity and scope of global scepticism since less sceptical arguments do not produce the same type or overall amounts of doubt. For example, “visual perceptual scepticism” is less sceptical than “visual and auditory perceptual scepticism,” which involves arguments that conclude that one cannot know anything on the basis of one’s vision and hearing (i.e., with respect to the two sensory modalities in combination or individually). Different types of perceptual scepticism provide their frameworks, contexts and hypothetical examples at different levels of analysis than global scepticism, which requires the most stringent conditions under which one (or many) can know something.

Various types of perceptual scepticism also provide different relations of relevancies to the arguments and knowledge-claims undergoing the analyses than other forms of scepticism do. Perceptual scepticism includes a vast range of levels of analyses that consist of several types of subdivisions, such as individual or combinations of sensory modalities (e.g., types of perceptual scepticism concerning vision, olfaction, taste etc.). Perceptual scepticism also involves varying roles of magnification levels concerning each of the sensory modalities and certain technologies (e.g., perceptual scepticism regarding the auditory mode and magnification levels via microphones that increase different intensities and volumes of sounds). Thus, there are various levels of analysis that are interrelated with varying grades of perceptual scepticism on the basis of sensory modes and magnification levels concerning each of the sensory modalities.

For instance, visual perceptual scepticism applies to specific temporal intervals and microscopic levels of observation and analysis, which may involve doubting alleged knowledge-claims relevant to observational descriptions concerning specific magnification levels with microscopes. Consider the information obtained and recorded via describing visual observations made with a microscope and how one may apply versions of visual perceptual scepticism to specific ranges of magnification levels that are attainable via the usage of a microscope, i.e., without applying visual perceptual scepticism to other

observations that are presumably knowable via visual perceptions. One may reasonably doubt alleged knowledge-claims, concerning magnification levels of 500X or higher, for example, which were concluded after observations and analysis of a microscopic organism with a specific microscope at some laboratory.

Certain levels of magnification for observations by means of microscopes are required in order to properly analyse events, things or parts, which are only viewable at microscopic levels. Historical analyses demonstrate both the increase in sophistication of technological instruments for magnification that thereby increase the magnification levels for observing. The 19th century yielded less instruments for magnifying the intensity of sounds than the 20th century concerning microphones and speakers, including volume magnifications with hydrophones for auditory observations under water. Hence, the latter types of specified levels of visual or auditory perceptual scepticism are important for historical analyses, namely, with respect to the different sensory modalities for observation and different magnification levels of observation. Such levels of observation emerged as a result of the historical developments of technologies by pioneers, such as Antony van Leeuwenhoek who improved the microscope during the 17th century and helped found microbiology, and the father of nuclear physics, Ernest Rutherford, who improved and patented the hydrophone during World War I.

The amount of relevancy, concerning more sceptical arguments, increases in relation to more specified levels of analysis and specified levels of observations in the following ranking order: **(1)** globally sceptical arguments, concluding that nothing that is recorded or remembered is known; **(2)** sceptical arguments concerning all perceptions that conclude no one can know anything on the basis of perception (e.g., because one may be dreaming or merely making claims about a virtual world); **(3)** visual perceptual scepticism arguments, concluding that one cannot know anything solely on the basis of visual perceptions (e.g., because visual illusions and hallucinations cannot be controlled or realization requires the accompaniment of another sensory modality in order to account for non-veridical visual observations); **(4)** sceptical arguments concluding that one cannot know about some organism at magnification levels of 500X or higher; and **(5)** perceptual scepticism that is applied to magnification levels above 500X and a specific range of time periods during which observational descriptions could not be reliably made with particular microscopes at certain laboratories (e.g., since the era lacked the technology, the recorded and alleged claim is dubious).

(5) may very well enable us to distinguish between the propositional knowledge of Antony van Leeuwenhoek and his speculative postulations or conjectures concerning his observational descriptions of spermatozoa, bacteria etc.

2. Methodology of Scepticism: Analysing Knowledge-Claims

A methodological value subsists in globally sceptical arguments. Valid arguments for global scepticism provide upper limitations for comprehensive analytic frameworks concerning knowledge (i.e., the most stringent set of necessary or sufficient conditions for attaining knowledge), or else theoretic frameworks must account for their ineffectiveness. Theoretical frameworks contain multiple levels of analyses, with which proposed knowledge-claims are, demonstrably, more dubious as the amount of necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge increase.

Moreover, any knowledge-claim may be evaluated in accordance with specified relations of relevancy concerning three crucial levels of analyses: **(i)** the level of analysis of the globally sceptical argument (i.e., the most sceptical type of argument); **(ii)** the level of analysis of less sceptical arguments that are still able to cast the claim into doubt and are most relevant to the context of significance or most appropriate level of analysis of the alleged knowledge-claim; and **(iii)** the level of analysis of the most sceptical argument that is nevertheless unable to repudiate the alleged knowledge-claim.

This approach of methodological scepticism requires the analyst to restrict herself to specific realms of knowledge for the purpose of analysing the alleged knowledge-claim in relation to domains of discourse that vary. One underlying principle supporting such an approach can be viewed in Barry Stroud's work when he states that:

Scepticism is most illuminating when restricted to particular areas of knowledge ... because it then rests on distinctive and problematic features of the alleged knowledge in question, not simply on some completely general conundrum in the notion of knowledge itself, or in the very idea of reasonable belief.²

An analysis yielding **(iii)** incorporates scepticism that is slightly less sceptical than **(ii)**. Thus, **(iii)** restricts itself to a more specified area of knowledge. **(iii)** involves the usage of scepticism that strongly supports the claim under investigation, demonstrating its validity at the highest level. Methodologies proceeding in order from **(i)** to **(iii)**, presuming that there are typically various

² Barry Stroud, *Understanding Human Knowledge: Philosophical Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 291.

levels of analyses between **(i)** and **(ii)**, allow an analyst to ascertain a degree of certainty at a level of analysis and observation in-between **(ii)** and **(iii)**.

One may well inquire why **(i)** is necessary for the proposed methodology of scepticism. I suggest that **(i)** is important for the same reason that a man with a large foot tends to find it comforting to purchase from a shoe store that also possesses the same models of shoes that are larger than those models he finds comfortable. If he buys the largest size of a model from a store without testing anything larger, he lacks an understanding of whether or not that particular model is best-suited for his wear. The same line of reasoning holds for that which fits into only the smallest models.

Where the abovementioned analogy differs, concerning the current proposal for methodological scepticism and an individual's method of testing shoes, is with respect to **(iii)** and the largest size of a model of shoes that nonetheless does not fit the potential customer. For there is generally no great obstacle with respect to finding a less sceptical argument than another one that is also unable to defeat the knowledge-claim undergoing the methodological analysis (i.e., something less sceptical than **(iii)**).

Although the "least sceptical argument," which casts a knowledge-claim into doubt, may not be definitively discoverable, the approximation of the level of analysis, from which the least sceptical argument can be derived, is applied specifically in order to provide a meta-analysis that analyses the analyses of the derivations of **(ii)** and **(iii)** in order to identify the highest levels of relevancy of the levels of observation and analysis.

2.1. Inability to Distinguish between Global Scepticism and Slightly Less Scepticisms

The distinction or lack of distinction drawn between **(i)** and **(ii)** with respect to a specific knowledge-claim is useful in relation to that claim's analysability and for illustrating how fundamental certain concepts and types of claims are with respect to any theoretical framework within which one works. The inability to ascertain a difference between **(i)** and **(ii)** with respect to some alleged knowledge-claim signifies constraints of the theoretic framework, within which one works, and indicates dubiousness (i.e., with respect to the claim's relevancy to other types of knowledge-claims) as well as the possibility for alternative systems or opposing theoretic frameworks.

For instance, according to Kris McDaniel:

The epistemology of the possible and the actual is fundamentally different: for example, we can know a priori that there is a merely possible talking donkey, but

we cannot know a priori that there is an actual talking donkey. The merely possible are governed by a principle of plentitude that does not govern the actual: at the very least, for every way that something actual could be, there is something possible that is that way. The hypothesis that these epistemological and metaphysical differences are grounded in different ways of existing is both viable and intellectually satisfying.³

McDaniel presents us with two different alleged knowledge-claims, which demonstrate an aspect of the expansiveness of his theoretic framework⁴ in addition to upper and lower limitations that appear to be at least impervious to various degrees of high levels of scepticism, regarding knowing what is possible, but easily yield to lower levels of scepticism with regard to knowledge a priori about what is actual. For instance, his first claim entails that it is possible to know a priori that some “merely possible talking donkey” is somewhere. With such a claim McDaniel expands the potential realm of a priori knowledge to include perhaps disjunctive claims, such as “x is necessary, contingently real or unreal, but not impossible,” i.e., where “x” is equivalent to “any merely possible thing or event.”

McDaniel’s second claim entails that it is impossible to know a priori that some actual talking donkey is somewhere. Of course, one reason why that might be considered impossible to know is that it is false that there is any talking donkey. However, McDaniel leaves the option available that it is true that perhaps donkeys secretly and actually talk, although we cannot know that they actually talk. The conjunction of the two propositions shows that McDaniel’s concept of a donkey incorporates the “possibility or potential to talk” as well as the ability to have knowledge of that possibility a priori, but he argues for the inability to have knowledge a priori of an actual talking donkey.

³ See chapter 10 in David Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman, *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 315–316.

⁴ The greater expansiveness of a system of thought or theoretical framework presents difficulties with respect to critically evaluating that system’s comprehensiveness. However, such systems become susceptible to criticisms concerning their lack of concision as well as their lack of internal and external consistency (i.e., evaluated on the basis of possessing internal contradictions or being inconsistent with other systems or with reality) and lack of practicality or application. McDaniel’s two alleged knowledge-claims would be presumed false by David Lewis’s theory within his *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1986), for instance, if McDaniel had attempted to distinguish between the ability to know about a merely possible talking donkey from the inability to know about a “real” talking donkey. So, his careful usage of terminology (i.e., stating “actual” instead of “real”) allows him to maintain consistency within at least two theoretic frameworks.

What is problematic for McDaniel is for him to answer whether or not we can know a priori that there is an actual talking human because if we can or do indeed know this, then the very concept of a human (i.e., as opposed to a donkey) would seem to incorporate talkativeness on the basis of *actual talking* as opposed to *merely possible talking*, despite the fact that some humans are actually mute. Accordingly, one may claim to know a priori that there is no actual talking donkey since the concept of a donkey (i.e., derived from ethology, cladistics and evolutionary biology) excludes talkativeness. Of course, the latter alleged knowledge-claim is open to scepticism but so is McDaniel's entire epistemological distinction between knowing a priori what is possible and knowing a priori what is actual.

McDaniel's theoretical framework provides only one alternative system of thought with respect to describing the relations between knowledge, possibility, actuality and scepticism. For instance, an opposing system is viewable both within the ancient Megareans and Spinoza's philosophies, which maintain that there is nothing that is both possible and unreal, and anything that never occurs is also impossible.⁵ So, according to Megaric philosophy, if there is (actually) never a talking donkey, then there cannot be "a merely possible talking donkey," which contradicts McDaniel's claims insofar as the epistemology of the possible and actual are closely intertwined. So, the merely possible need not be "governed by a principle of plentitude that does not govern the actual," i.e., in stark contrast to McDaniel's system.

The major difference between McDaniel's system and the Megaric one is that McDaniel misrecognizes something if it is originally considered to be possible but contingently unreal, and then it is later recognized as unreal but also impossible, whereas a Megarean misrecognizes something if it is originally considered to be possible, and then it is recognized as unreal. The Megaric system argues against there being any value in claims about "merely possible things" since the importance of something resides in it being real and substantial.

The addition of an alternative system, such as the Megaric system, illustrates that the level of analysis reached via global scepticism is fundamentally higher than any particular system of thought. System thinking produces fundamental parts of problem thinking, and problem thinking places each system in opposition with their alternatives without any favouritism toward any specific

⁵ More about the topic of the Megarean system can be found in Nicolai Hartmann, "Der Megarische Und Der Aristotelische Möglichkeitsbegriff. Ein Beitrag Zur Geschichte Des Ontologischen Modalitätsproblems," *Abhandlungen der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse* 10 (1937): 1-17.

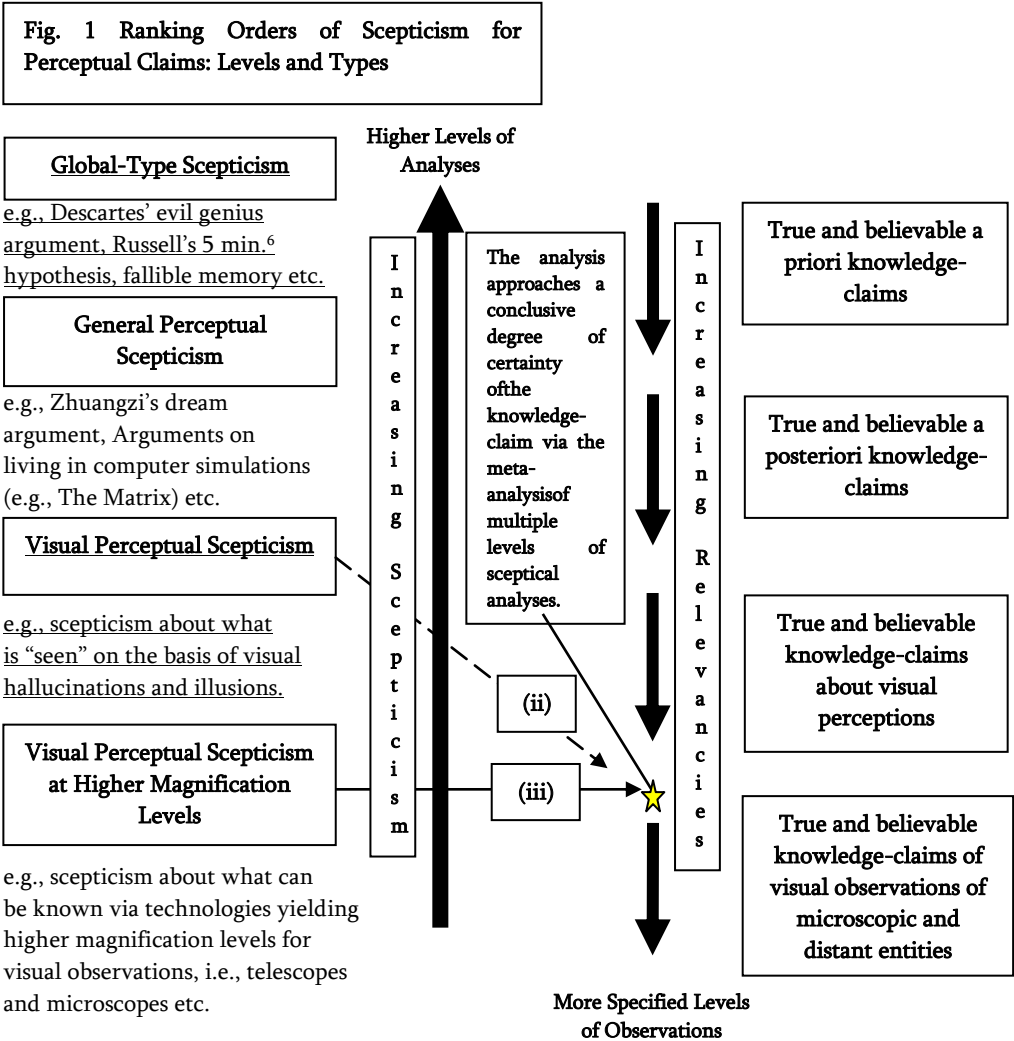
system. The distinction drawn between (i) and (ii) demonstrates an attempt to reach more specified levels of observation and analysis regarding the alleged knowledge-claim, whereas the failure to draw a distinction between (i) and (ii) serves as an indicator that the claim presumes stricter conditions that are directly related to the ability to attain knowledge, for instance.

McDaniel's alleged knowledge-claim that "we can know a priori that there is a merely possible talking donkey" is one example of the failure to draw a distinction between (i) and (ii) partially because it undermines global scepticism. Therefore, the alleged knowledge-claim may best be characterised as a presumption of the theoretical framework or as a speculative assumption that outlines the expansiveness of that particular system, which is comparable with other systems and, thus, dubious in accordance with problem thinking.

2.2. Order of the Methodology of Scepticism

Figure 1 illustrates an aspect of the scheme of the proposed methodology for utilising different grades of scepticism with ordered steps that approach a discovery of the level of analysis, at which an alleged knowledge-claim is most relevant, and the degree of certainty, with which the claim is best ascertained. I suggest that the analyst apply scepticism methodologically, first, from the most sceptical and then proceed toward the least sceptical counter-arguments in order to discover the particular amount of reassurance that is ascertainable about knowledge-claims concerning observations. This entails the utilization of ordering the analysis from (1) to (5) concerning proposed knowledge-claims that incorporate visual descriptions of microscopic organisms, for example. Lastly, methodological scepticism and the production of a meta-analysis, concerning (i), (ii) and (iii), may prove most useful when hypotheses about the least sceptical but successful arguments (i.e., (ii)) and most sceptical but unsuccessful arguments (i.e., (iii)) are formed, concerning the attempts to repeatedly repudiate and then to reconfirm each claim undergoing the investigation.

An initial formation of hypotheses for (ii) and (iii) before the usage of methodological scepticism may allow hypotheses to undergo testing in a similar way to the scientific method, although the most highly relevant levels of analyses (i.e., concerning (ii) and (iii)) lack a direct relationship with observation that scientific methodology has. The analysis of knowledge is thereby approximated and balanced between (ii) and (iii), awaiting further relevant, observational data.



The methodological approach of scepticism I offer here requires the analyst to restrict herself to some particular area of knowledge or domain of discourse while utilising varying levels of scepticism in stages in order to produce a "meta-analysis," namely, an analysis of sceptical arguments both able and unable to refute the alleged knowledge-claim. The "higher levels of analyses" in Fig. 1 are those that involve the most stringent and complex demarcation criteria for the

⁶ See Lecture IX Memory in Bertrand Russell, *The Analysis of Mind* (London: George Allen & Unwin LTD, 1921), 159.

possession of knowledge. The “more specified levels of observation” concern the precision of measurements, specific magnification levels, and specified units of time concerning the observation undergoing the investigation in relation to the alleged knowledge-claim.

This sceptical methodological approach aims to provide a meta-analysis of successfully sceptical arguments with their interrelationships to the analysis of unsuccessful sceptical arguments, which all directly concern the alleged knowledge under investigation. The meta-analysis provides higher levels of relevancy from which evaluations are made with grades of certainty in proportion to their identifiable localities in relation to global-type sceptical analyses. The relevant and localisable level, which is identified via the meta-analysis, is approximated via **(ii)** and **(iii)** (i.e., by means of “the least sceptical but successfully sceptical arguments and hypotheses” in combination with “the most sceptical but unsuccessfully sceptical arguments”).

An analyst who is familiar with the effectiveness of methodological scepticism may begin by forming hypotheses for **(ii)** and **(iii)**. Methodological scepticism best begins the analysis of the alleged knowledge-claim from the most stringent and sceptical hypotheses and argumentative approach (i.e., global-types of scepticism) and proceeds step by step to ever less sceptical hypotheses, attempting to hallmark **(ii)** and **(iii)** in order to approximate the highest level of relevancy of the proposed claim. The methodology is applicable to numerous types of scepticism since types of scepticism generally involve gradations of greater and lesser amounts, including modal scepticism, ethical scepticism, religious scepticism etc., although this essay refrains from further addressing the latter types of scepticism.

3. Relations of Knowledge to Grades of Scepticism and Certainty

Many arguments, such as arguments that maintain that forgetfulness is both always possible and impedes knowledge at any point, demonstrate that scepticism is epistemically inescapable. So, in essence, there is no knowledge-claim that cannot be doubted to some degree. Even Descartes’ famous claim “I think; therefore, I am” has been demonstrated to be dubious with respect to individuals inflicted with Cotard’s delusion, under which condition individuals form consistent webs of beliefs that they are dead, brain-dead and decomposing.⁷ Thus, thinking may be insufficient for one to knowledgably conclude that one exists.

⁷ A. W. Young and K. M. Leafhead, “Betwixt Life and Death: Case Studies of the Cotard Delusion,” in *Method in Madness: Case studies in Cognitive Neuropsychiatry*, eds. P. W. Halligan and J. C. Marshall (Hove, Sussex: Psychology Press, 1996), 155.

The degree to which a proposed knowledge-claim is doubted is the level of analysis that extends beyond the realms from which the evidence and relevant claim are derived. That is, scepticism allows any claim to be doubted via extending further than the level of observation and analysis, from which the claim is decidedly concluded. A series of different types and lower grades of sceptical arguments allow us to determine the level of certainty with which we can evaluate some given statement and lines of argumentation as proposed knowledge-claims, specifically when lower gradations of sceptical arguments include (ii) and (iii).

Stephen Maitzen maintains that:

... if there are domains whose truths we cannot know, then there must be claims *outside* those domains that we cannot know even if they are true. ... Understood as a thesis, skepticism about a domain of discourse is the epistemological claim that no one knows any of the true propositions that the domain may contain.⁸

Maitzen argues that it is impossible to contain scepticism within a specific domain of discourse (i.e., localising scepticism), which is consistent with a methodological approach that attempts to describe alleged knowledge in relation to each of the domains of discourse in order to discover the domain of the highest relevance to the alleged knowledge.

I agree with Maitzen and emphasise that scepticism is required in order to form accurate analyses of knowledge-claims and ought to be unleashed upon each of the specific domains of discourse in order to provide the locations of knowledge-claims within analytic frameworks constructed via rational processes of grading types of scepticism and levels of scepticism in relation to one another. Levelling the analysis of knowledge via methodological scepticism is requisite in order to understand the relevant levels of observation (i.e., regarding magnification levels, sensory modalities, time intervals etc.), levels of analysis (i.e., critical, sceptical etc.) and degrees of certainty.

I also agree with Nicolai Hartmann who stated that:

Everything in life that we call our knowledge is in actuality a bundle of knowledge and misapprehension. We do not have a direct criterion of truth; truth is not a graspable moment of content of the realization, but is rather a relation to something, which we do not recognize other than through our level of knowledge, as the subject matter. All verification proceeds in the circuitous way of the testing of the subject matter. The consciousness of the subject matter cannot generally, in life, temporise each verification, which it anticipates,

⁸ Stephen Maitzen, "The Impossibility of Local Skepticism," *Philosophia*. 34 (2006): 453-464. Maitzen makes these claims on page 453.

complements, combines and takes for truth the unexamined product. Also the sciences are not free from this, and every researcher knows it well and reckons with the source of misapprehension; but also the researcher must still reckon with the still vague chance of the encounter, letting the unproven and hypothetical apply, whereby the correct estimates of the grade of certainty of it can never be certain. It creates theories that become controversial and advocated and must become, once again, allowed to be abandoned. After all, they correct themselves within the course of time; the science advances, and that, which proves to be valid, subsists.⁹

Degrees of certainty ascertained via methodological scepticism are open to the same criticisms and additional scepticism since any analysis yielding a degree of certainty may be confronted with a meta-analysis that applies scepticism to it. However, the methodology of scepticism, which I have provided, presents a rigorous and critical method that utilises instruments from the philosopher's tool kit in addition to the observational descriptions of science, contributing with a specific order of steps from which we can work.

⁹ Nicolai Hartmann, *Der philosophische Gedanke und seine Geschichte* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1936/1977), 4-5 (translation by William A. Brant).