

## Tilburg University

### Reply to Klaus Vieweg Phyrro and the wisdom of animals. Hegel on scepticism as "the free side of all philosophy"

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### Reply to Klaus Vieweg by Paul Cobben

I am very happy that you have chosen to discuss the concept “scepticism” in your paper. In my opinion, there are two reasons which make your contribution very valuable in the contexts of this conference on “Wisdom and academic education”. Firstly, the concept of scepticism is closely related to a common sense analysis of our current cultural environment. Our era is often diagnosed as an era of scepticism. Traditional values are continually undermined; everything is put into perspective. Our epoch is similarly characterised as the epoch of subjective freedom. Anything goes. The calculating citizen strives to achieve his egoistic goals, while remaining disinterested in the wider community. In reaction to this normless freedom, our time as seen the manifestation of all kinds of fundamentalism, not the least of which the fundamentalism of radical Muslim movements. The Dutch prime-minister has in fact called upon citizens in this country to rehabilitate a sense for values and norms. Philosophical reflection on the meaning of scepticism can therefore demonstrate in what sense a philosopher can be involved in urgent social problems.

Secondly, you showed that this social commitment need not contradict an academic approach. Your philosophical reflection confronts the common sense notion of scepticism with something foreign. Scepticism is not what it initially seems to be. To develop this point you took, in accordance with Hegel’s analysis, the following steps:

1. Scepticism is an ambiguous conception: although it may seem only a theoretical conception, which questions the possibility of objective knowledge, it is at the same time a practical conception; in fact the sceptic wants to be freed of the worries of the real world.

2. Although scepticism may seem only a subjective conception, it is also an objective conception: if all pretension to know the objective world can be rejected by argumentation, the reality of this objective world is nevertheless presupposed. Furthermore, if the escape from the objective world is presented as contributing to subjective happiness, this happiness nonetheless remains an objective goal.

3. This philosophical understanding of scepticism opposes the purely negative common sense notion of scepticism. Scepticism can be understood as an inclusive part of a philosophical concept of freedom, for example the Kantian concept of moral autonomy.

4. In your view, however, the Kantian concept of freedom is in some sense too "sceptical", i.e., it is a concept of freedom which remains too isolated from social reality. Freedom has to be thought of as a unity of freedom and *res publica*. An adequate philosophical conception of freedom has to develop those social institutions which can make freedom manifest in the real world.

In your lecture, you endeavoured, I quote, "to point out the topicality of Hegel's understanding of wisdom – wisdom needs genuine scepticism as an antidote to dogmatism and fundamentalism, but it is also an inclusive part of philosophy". It has become apparent that the topicality of Hegel's understanding of wisdom is closely related to his conception of freedom. Moreover, his conception of freedom cannot be divorced from those social institutions in which freedom is practiced. To understand what freedom is, we have to understand the institutions in which citizens "live" their freedom. In the light of the theme of our conference I would like to ask you whether this observa-

tion has consequences for “academic education”. Does this observation imply a kind of labour division between philosophers and scientists? Do philosophers need scientists in order to understand the workings of such institutions? Do scientists need philosophers in order to discuss a possible inner sense of these institutions? What would be a suitable setting for discussions between philosophers and scientists?