The nature of the sceptic’s challenge

BELIEF AND KNOWLEDGE

To believe something is not to know it. First, we can have beliefs that are false. But we can only know what is true. For thousands of years, people believed the Earth was flat. But they didn’t know this (though they believed they knew it!), because the Earth is not flat. Second, even true beliefs might not count as knowledge, because the person may have no good reason, no evidence, for their belief. If you believe someone is guilty because they dress funny, you may be right – they are guilty – but your belief is not justified. How someone dresses is no evidence for guilt. So only justified beliefs can count as knowledge.

Scepticism is the view that our usual justifications for claiming our beliefs amount to knowledge are inadequate, so we do not in fact have knowledge. While some philosophers have understood scepticism as a kind of theory, it is better to understand it as a kind of challenge. But rather than talk about scepticism in the abstract, we shall begin straight away with some sceptical arguments. Throughout our discussion of scepticism, we shall be concerned predominantly with scepticism regarding knowledge of the physical, external world, i.e. the sceptical challenge to our empirical knowledge.

OUR VULNERABILITY TO ERROR

Arguments from illusion

As soon as we reflect on our sense experience, it becomes apparent that what we perceive isn’t quite the same as what we believe is ‘out there’. For example, if you put your thumb up against the moon, it looks like your thumb is larger than the moon, but it isn’t. If you look at a red rose in sodium street lights, it looks grey, but the rose itself hasn’t changed. If you half-submerge a straight stick in water and look at it from the side, it looks bent; but it isn’t. So what we perceive in all these cases isn’t the world as it is.

We could argue that this demonstrates that perception is not a reliable guide to how things are. But this is too quick. Perceptual illusions are special cases. Otherwise we wouldn’t be able to talk about them as illusions – it is through perception that we know the moon is larger than my thumb, that sticks are not in fact bent when half-submerged in water, and so on. So the argument doesn’t undermine perception generally.

But some philosophers have claimed that cases of illusion show that we don’t perceive the world directly; we perceive it in virtue of perceiving sense-data, our subjective experiences of the world. But if we only ever perceive sense-data directly, says the sceptic, we can never know what the physical world is actually like, or even that it exists. All we have ‘access’ to is our sense-data; who knows what lies beyond them? We can never know what, if anything, causes them.

An argument from dreaming

Descartes provides a different argument to undermine perception, by appealing to dreaming. Sometimes when we dream, we represent to ourselves all sorts of crazy things.
But sometimes we dream the most mundane things. Yet ‘there are no conclusive signs by
means of which one can distinguish clearly between being awake and being asleep’.
(Meditations, p. 97) So how can we know that what we experience we perceive rather than
dream?

This argument attacks all sense-perception, even the most mundane and most certain.
You cannot know that you see a piece of paper because you cannot know that you are
not dreaming of seeing a piece of paper.

Some philosophers argue that there are ways of distinguishing perception from
dreaming, such as the far greater coherence of perception. But how do we know that
dreams have less coherence than perception? We cannot know that what is apparently
perception is not really a particularly coherent dream.

Descartes presses the argument from dreaming further. It may seem that ‘whether I am
awake or sleeping, two and three added together always make five’ (98). But people do
make mistakes about matters they believe they know certainly. And so even truths of
logic and of mathematics come under attack. Are not just his perceptual experiences, but
also his thoughts, open to doubt?

HOW WE CAN MOVE FROM ‘APPEARS’ SO TO ‘IS’ SO
The two arguments above illustrate the most important move in sceptical arguments, viz.
that from what appears to be the case, we cannot reliably infer what is the case. There is
a distinction between appearance and reality. To gain knowledge, we have to establish
the truth about reality. But we only have appearance to go on. This is what makes us
vulnerable to error. Two other kinds of argument support the sceptical claim.

Disagreement
In Plato’s Protagoras, he notes that for a wide range of properties, people often disagree
about how the world is. The air can seem warm to one person, cold to another; one
person may judge the sea is ‘blue’, another says it is ‘green’. We can use this to present
two different sceptical challenges. First, faced with disagreement, how can I be sure that
what I experience is how the world is? Second, given that everyone is in the same
position, does it make sense to say the air is objectively warm or cold? Aren’t we forced
into subjectivism?

We can respond that these disagreements apply more to some sorts of perception than
others. For example, people agree that the air is a gas, not a liquid. The disagreements
presuppose a lot of agreement in our perceptions, which supports the claim that
perception gives us knowledge. Second, in many cases, we have objective ways of settling
the disagreement. We can measure how long something is; and if one person carries on
saying ‘it is long’ and another ‘it is short’, we just say they are using the terms differently.
This works to some extent with ‘hot’ and ‘cold’, e.g. someone who has a fever is not a
good judge of whether a room is cold or not. We say ‘the air feels cold to them’, even
though ‘the air is warm’. We reach objectivity by appealing to agreement again: the air is
warm, the sea is blue if this is how it seems to normal people under normal conditions.

The brain in a vat
At the end of our discussions of sense-data and of dreaming, the sceptic argues that our
experience could be exactly as it is, while the world is completely different from how we
believe it to be, e.g. only sense-data could exist or we could be dreaming. This is the claim that there can be states of mind qualitatively indistinguishable from perception of an external world. When dreaming, I may have a visual experience that – if I were awake – would give me the knowledge that I was looking at a glass of water. I can’t distinguish my dream from the real thing by how it seems to me.

A thought experiment makes the point. Suppose that we are not walking, talking human beings, but simply brains in vats. Connected to my brain is a supercomputer that feeds in just the right impulses to generate the illusion of reality as it is. I’m being deceived. I cannot know that this is not, in fact, the case; because if it is true, things seem exactly the same as if I am a walking, talking person. If I were a brain in a vat, my experiences would be qualitatively indistinguishable from the experiences I have if I am not. I can’t know, therefore, whether I am, in fact, a brain in a vat or not. But if I am a brain in a vat, all my beliefs about what I experience are false; I have no body, I’m not sitting at a computer, I’m not hearing the sounds of keys clicking, etc. I cannot make any inference from what appears to be the case to what is the case.

(Furthermore, I cannot trust my memories, because the computer could create ‘memories’ of things that never happened. So I cannot know anything about the past, including whether it happened at all. Perhaps I only just came into existence, and all my memories are false. In fact, if my thoughts are being fed to me by a super-computer, then I can’t be certain of them. Isn’t it possible that every time I think ‘$2 + 2 = ?$’, the computer makes me think ‘4’ when the answer is actually 5? So even judgments about logic and mathematics are not certain. If I have no mental agency, then the very idea of genuinely making a judgement, whatever that judgement is, is undermined. And if I cannot judge, then I cannot know.)

**HOW SCEPTICAL ARGUMENTS CONNECT TO THE PROBLEM OF JUSTIFYING BELIEFS WE HOLD**

Philosophical doubt can get started by reflecting on how we know what we think we know. We discover judgments it seems silly to doubt, but for which we seem to have no clear justification. Take the belief that I have two hands. Why do I believe this? Well, I can feel them, I can see them. But, says the sceptic, couldn’t my experience – what I feel and what I see – be just the same even if I were dreaming? Or if I were a brain in a vat? If I don’t know I’m not dreaming or a brain in a vat, do I really know that I have two hands? In fact, do I know that a world exists outside my mind at all? But if I don’t know that, how can I know anything?

Philosophical doubts are peculiar. They don’t make sense in everyday circumstances. Of course, if I’ve just been in an accident, and can’t feel my left arm, doubting whether I have two hands does make sense! But the sceptic is not interested in these propositions when we have an ‘everyday reason’ to doubt them. The sceptic’s reason for doubting them does not arise from a particular context – it is a general doubt about their justifiability. The sceptic admits that there is no everyday reason to doubt whether I have two hands or whether there is an external world. But that doesn’t mean there isn’t *any* reason to doubt these things. How do I know that appearance is a reliable guide to reality?

Is this sort of sceptical doubt doubt? It has no practical consequences, and a philosophical sceptic is not a very cautious person! Yet the sceptic insists that sceptical doubts are relevant
— we should know that we are not wired up to a super-computer if we are to know that ‘This is a hand.’

Yet we might still think that it is ‘unreasonable’ to have such doubts. But this misunderstands the role or purpose of doubt. The sceptic doesn’t suggest that there is any reason to believe in sceptical possibilities, but requests that we rule them out as possibilities. Doubt based on challenging us to rule out the possibility of very unlikely situations is called ‘hyperbolic’ doubt. And the purpose of this doubt is to help us find what we can know, if anything. In other words, the sceptic presents his challenge in order to help us discover what we know and how we know it.

The effect of sceptical doubts is not ‘We can’t be certain of our everyday judgements, although they are probably true.’ It is to put the whole idea of our usual justifications into question. If these sceptical possibilities were true, we would have absolutely no reason to hold on to our usual beliefs. If I was wired up to a supercomputer, things seem exactly the same, but the reality is completely different. Sceptical arguments aim to completely undercut our usual justifications.

Scepticism is sometimes taken as the claim that nothing is known. But this is not a good definition, for it must then defend the claim that we can know nothing, which is trivially self-defeating anyway (because then we would know that we know nothing – so there is something we know). Likewise, scepticism is not claim that our beliefs are all false. For this is not logically coherent. For instance, my beliefs that ‘I am not at the South Pole’ and that ‘I am not at the North Pole’ can’t both be false (obviously, both can be true). Scepticism is best understood as the claim that our usual justification for claiming our beliefs amount to knowledge is inadequate.