

Philsoc Student Essay Prize - Trinity 2003: Third Prize

Is there any satisfactory alternative to epistemological scepticism?

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Philosophy is the quest for truth; that is why the problem of possessing reliable knowledge is of major relevance to Philosophy. However, there have been philosophers who deny the possibility of obtaining trustworthy knowledge. Scepticism has been present in the History of Philosophy since the Indian Vedas, the oldest philosophical documents we know, and the radical scepticism of Protagoras. Descartes used scepticism as a strategy to search for the foundations of knowledge; David Hume states that there is no way to know whether our concepts have anything at all to do with what goes on in the real world itself, and even contemporary philosophers discuss the possibility of reaching knowledge we may trust.

One of the most striking and influential uses of scepticism in Modern Philosophy is posed by Descartes. In his First Meditation, Descartes starts reflecting on the existence of his body and the role of the senses in acquiring knowledge, continues with the existence of his mind and the nature of the knowledge it may obtain, then goes on to think of the role of God in his search for certain and reliable knowledge, as well as the role of other causes, and concludes his strategy of advancing doubt with the astonishing argument of the *genium malignum*, which has a contemporary version in the *brains-in-a-vat* hypothesis. In both hypotheses, the role of the senses in differentiating a real from an artificial world seems to be null, and this is one of the 3 reasons why sceptics deny that we cannot be certain about the reliability of the knowledge we may acquire.

It seems that scepticism is an ever present idea that makes human beings doubt their intellectual skills and qualities. But let us now proceed to discuss some alternative options of thought with respect to the pervasive presence of scepticism in science and philosophy. One of the versions of scepticism is radical scepticism. Radical sceptics claim that we cannot know anything at all. However, is radical scepticism plausible? For, how is a radical sceptic supposed to know that she does not know anything at all if she does not know anything? Other forms of scepticism exist, and one of the most relevant is the one that denies the possibility of being able to reach a partial or total knowledge of the external world. One of the most remarkable hypotheses of scepticism in this sense is the one posed by Descartes. For this philosopher, one of the strategies for advancing doubt is the Evil Demon, who deceives us with respect to reality; he then introduces the idea of God to guarantee the possibility for human beings of getting real knowledge. At this point, we may realise that God is not part of the state of affairs caused by the existence of the Malicious Demon. Similarly, the *brains-in-a-vat* hypothesis was elaborated by someone who is outside the state of affairs she proposes. Thus, the problem of knowledge posed by both hypotheses may have a solution if we consider these systems of beliefs from an external perspective, God in the first hypothesis, and the designer in the second hypothesis. We may also

notice that the problem seems unsolvable if we are immersed in the state of affairs. So, either in the hypothesis of the Evil Demon or the brain-in-a-vat hypothesis, we realise that there is no possibility of making a distinction between reality and an artificial world when we belong to the system created by the designers of both hypotheses. That is why they appear unsolvable.

Descartes himself recognised that his self, even though isolated, could be saved from scepticism. As for the brains-in-a-vat hypothesis, which co-exists with the possibility of the existence of a real world, we may consider that when two hypotheses exist and possess the same conditions, namely, that the role of the senses seems to be null to distinguish reality from a virtual world, one of them is an empty hypothesis. Thus, why not consider the brains-in-a-vat hypothesis as the empty hypothesis? And in the case when a person has not always been a brain-in-a-vat, then there is a difference in the state of affairs that the designer of this thought experiment knows about. A similar reasoning may be applied to the hypothesis of the Malicious Demon.

One of the causes for the rise of modern scepticism is the mind-body dualism posed by Descartes and his followers. The senses deceive, they may not be of help in reaching certain and dependable knowledge, but it is possible for the mind alone to reach certain and reliable knowledge. Something similar happens in the brains-in-a-vat hypothesis: our senses cannot help us distinguish between the real and the virtual worlds, so our mind may be deceived. In order to find a solution to the problem posed by these two hypotheses, we may consider the fact of the continuity of mind and body. A human being consists of a whole, a unit, not of the assembling of parts. Peter Strawson considers the person as a whole: a human being may not be divided into parts and considered partially as a brain, or a mind, or a body. Robert Boyle also describes the body-mind composed as continuity. Thus, there is an alternative to epistemological scepticism with respect to the knowledge of the external world, one that might not be satisfactory, but deserves being considered: an empiricism-realism with the distinction that is a question for contemporary debate, reality as it may appear to us is not the same as the one contemporary science explains through theories and hypotheses. The problem of the objectivity of the world is a really complex concept as well as a matter of philosophical debate and scientific research. Hence, reality may be considered as having at least two different categories: the one perceived by a human being as such, and the one described by scientists. The question now is: Should they indeed differ? Perhaps, but we should not forget that what we are considering is the same object: reality.

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