

## Philosophical scepticism<sup>1</sup>

### THE PARTICULAR NATURE OF PHILOSOPHICAL SCEPTICISM

There is a distinction between belief, even true belief, and knowledge. According to many philosophers, knowledge requires a justification. For example, someone on a jury might think that the person on trial is guilty just from the way they dress. Their belief, that the person is guilty, might be true; but how someone dresses isn't evidence for whether they are a criminal! True beliefs can be formed or held on irrational grounds, for no good reason. Or again true beliefs can just be lucky. For example, there is a lot of evidence that astrology does not make accurate predictions, and my horoscope has often been wrong. Suppose on one occasion, I read my horoscope and believe a prediction, although I know there is evidence against thinking it is right. And then this prediction turns out true! When we form a belief, we should do so rationally, on the basis of reasons and evidence. If we do, then our belief will be justified. And this belief, if it is also true will amount to 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. Scepticism can target knowledge from any source, including perception and reason. And so it challenges both empiricism and rationalism.

But before saying more about the nature of philosophical scepticism, let's look at a famous example.

#### Am I a brain in a vat?

Thought experiments are a philosophical method designed to test a hypothesis or philosophical claim through imagining a hypothetical situation, and coming to a judgment. Here is a thought experiment that tests whether we have any knowledge at all.

Suppose that I am not a walking, talking human being, but simply a brain in a vat. Connected to my brain is a supercomputer that feeds in just the right impulses to generate the illusion of reality as it is. All of my sensory experiences are being produced in my brain by electrical signals from the supercomputer. I'm living in a virtual reality. Since I think that the reality I experience is one of physical objects and other people, I'm being deceived.

Here is the sceptical challenge: I cannot know that I am not a brain in a vat. If I were, things would 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

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<sup>1</sup> This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for AS and A Level: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge), Ch. 2, pp. 185-189

the experiences I have if I am not. So I can't have any evidence that I am not a brain in a vat. So 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. More importantly, even if I'm not a brain in a vat, and reality is as I think it is, my true belief lacks justification. I don't have any reason to believe that reality is as I think rather than to believe that I am a brain in a vat. But if my belief that reality is as I think is not justified, then it isn't knowledge. I don't know that I'm not just a brain in a vat.

Let's extend the thought experiment. The supercomputer feeds me not only sense experiences, but also 'memories'. So 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.

Let's take it one step further. Perhaps even my thoughts are being fed to me by a super-computer. Isn't it possible that every time I think ' $2 + 2 = ?$ ', the computer makes me think '4' when the answer is actually 5? Can I know that this isn't happening? How? If I can't, then my belief that  $2 + 2 = 4$  isn't justified. And so I can't know that  $2 + 2 = 4$ .

#### The distinction between philosophical scepticism and normal incredulity

Reflecting on the thought experiment of being a brain in a vat helps us understand some peculiar features of philosophical scepticism and how it differs from normal incredulity, our normal everyday doubts about whether some claim is true or not.

Philosophical scepticism can get started by reflecting on how we know what we think we know. Take the belief that I have two hands. I think I know that I have two hands. But how do I know 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 if I were a brain in a vat? If I don't know I'm not 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? How do I know that appearance is a reliable guide to reality?

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 justification. 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.

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 a brain in a vat wired up to a super-computer if we are to know that 'This is a hand.'

## **THE ROLE/FUNCTION OF SCEPTICISM WITHIN EPISTEMOLOGY**

The effect of philosophical scepticism 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.

We might think that it is 'unreasonable' to have such doubts. But this misunderstands the role or purpose of doubt. While some philosophers have understood philosophical scepticism as a kind of theory, it is better to understand it as a kind of challenge. The sceptic doesn't suggest that there is any reason to believe in sceptical possibilities of thought experiments, but requests that we rule them out as possibilities. In trying to meet the sceptic's challenge, we can discover what we know and how we know it.

Scepticism is sometimes taken as the claim that nothing is known. But this is not a good definition of philosophical scepticism, 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. 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.

## **LOCAL AND GLOBAL SCEPTICISM**

Local scepticism is scepticism about some specific claim, or more commonly, about some area/branch of supposed knowledge. We might doubt whether we can know how many planets exist in the universe (without doubting astronomy in general). Or more broadly, we might doubt whether there can be any knowledge about God's existence and nature (without doubting, say, scientific knowledge). Our normal incredulity is always local - we have specific reasons for doubting specific claims, and in our philosophical 'moods', we may doubt knowledge about religion, ethics, and so on.

Global scepticism extends doubt without limit. The brain in a vat provides an example. If we can't know whether or not we are brains in vats, and cannot even trust our reasoning, then it seems all our knowledge comes into question. Global scepticism has focused especially on having no knowledge of an external world of physical objects. If we can secure knowledge of such a mind-independent world, we will have defeated global scepticism, whatever conclusions we reach about the other branches of knowledge.