

Scepticism

'Scepticism' merely means doubt, as when you are sceptical about a weather forecast. In philosophy we may be sceptical about many things, but it mainly refers to 'global' scepticism, which is doubt about knowledge of the external world. Can you know that a book in front of you really exists? Other sorts of scepticism focus on the meaningfulness of language, the reliability of reason and logic, the truths offered by memory, and the existence of other minds. If one embraced all of these scepticism simultaneously it would make attempts at philosophising pointless (and one ancient thinker just gave up talking!). The normal strategy is to assume that some parts of our cognitive system work fine, and use them to sceptically question other parts. They can thus take it in turns to be doubted.

If we are looking at a real book, there is no evidence that makes us doubt its existence. Scepticism arises when we start to ask *how* we know the book is there (a question normally only asked by philosophers). If we give a standard account, that we experience sensations, which combine into a form which we recognise, and to which we attach the concept or word 'book', then we can see how this procedure might go wrong. The sensations may be produced by something other than a book, our minds may distort our sensations, our recognitions may result from false memories, and our concepts may be muddled or misapplied. For the first possibility, that something else is producing the sensations, philosophers have imagined that things may not be as they seem. God is presumed powerful enough to produce a bogus book, and an evil demon might have that power and be wicked enough to do it. Nowadays we surmise that you might be a '**brain-in-a-vat**' – that is, an isolated brain, controlled by a wicked scientist who inputs nutrients, and electronically creates sensations such as those made by a book. You are thus living in virtual reality.

For the second possibility (that your own mind is the deceiver) philosophers point to our **dreams**. We frequently have realistic (and even frightening) dreams, which we totally believe while they occur, but we then awake and see they are untrue. You might think this confirms waking reality, but the point is that we all admit that we can wholly believe a scenario which is not true, which makes our judgement of reality unreliable. If you believed a dream that you were a butterfly, how can you be sure that you are not a butterfly dreaming that it is human?

There are also **illusions** and confusions which occur when we seem to be awake. A square tower looks round from a distance, a pigeon's neck seems to lack a fixed colour, if I cross my eyes I see two realities instead of one, straight oars look bent in water, and in a mist I think I see things which turn out not to be there. Modern science tells us there is a time-lag while light reaches us from an object. We don't see stars as they are now, but as they used to be. For close objects the time-lag is very small, but still there, so our hopes of seeing reality directly are just wrong. To simply trust our senses seems to be foolish, once we become aware of such awkward evidence. Even if the input is not altered by evil deceivers, and our senses are working successfully, other things can go wrong. I may see a book but fail to recognise it, because of the lighting or an unusual angle, and even if I categorise it correctly, I can raise sceptical questions about the stability and truthfulness of my ideas or language. In early discussions of these issues it was found that every theory put forward seemed to be met by a counter-theory, and this generated a further scepticism – that every proposal has a matching counter-proposal, so that conclusions are never possible.

A particularly vulnerable part of my processes for acquiring knowledge is **memory**. Language and thought can't even occur without short-term memory, and for knowledge of the world we need a store of prior knowledge on which we can draw. But the reason why we place great trust in our most immediate memories (of two minutes ago) is nothing more than a strong and confident feeling about them. Other people, or photographs, may confirm the memories, but once we become suspicious about memory all the supporting evidence also becomes suspect. There seems no way to deny that the whole of reality might (just 'might'!) have been created one minute ago, including my memories, which are all thus entirely false. This produces scepticism about the past, and also about the ways in which we understand experiences that seem to be of the present. And if we don't trust the past any more, the future is even more worrying.

If we put all these fears about deception, dreaming, illusions and false memory together, the picture of global scepticism, which initially seemed unthinkable, can begin to seem plausible. One response is to accept the conclusion, reject all firm beliefs (called 'dogmas') in philosophy, and try to live while suspending as many beliefs as possible. A gentler response ('mitigated' scepticism) accepts our experiences, without fearing a malicious and distorting source for them, but thereafter makes as few claims as possible about what they tell us.

If there were easy replies to all of this, scepticism would have vanished long ago. One attempt to reject most of these problems is an appeal to inference to the best explanation. Taking the world roughly as we find it seems to explain our experiences much better than poorly motivated stories of wicked scientists, or sustained and systematic delusions. There is, though, no way to assess the likelihood of such surprising possibilities, so to reject them as highly unlikely is wishful thinking. There is also the 'common sense' strategy, which says that looking at my own hand is more convincing than any sceptical argument could ever be. That, too, sounds a bit hopeful, and may just be a refusal to face the problem.

One strategy with illusions is to deny that they are like real experiences, and so it is a mistake to confuse the two. Illusions are isolated experiences, and an illusion in one of our senses can usually be refuted by checking with the other senses, or with other people. The possibility of an external deceiver is hard to refute, but the idea that we are dreaming the real world can at least be challenged. It is not enough to say dreams in bed are vague, disjointed and unrealistic, because the sceptics just say the problem is the precise, coherent and very plausible dreams during the day. But we can say that reality is highly confirmed by other people (even if we are dreaming them), that language may imply a real community of speakers out there, and that mere thinking can't change the world (in the way that imagination can). We may even claim that full statements of scepticism are incoherent, because they assume logic, meaning, and a background of reality which is essential to even describe delusions and errors. We all live our lives as if they were real, and even philosophers find full commitment to global scepticism almost impossible.