

## Most of what we believe is true

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No one knows anything at all about anything, or so at least philosophical sceptics believe.

The sceptics had better be wrong, one line of worry goes, for if they are right, we are all of us entirely out of touch with what's actually going on around us. That's not a pleasant thought. It undercuts our sense, if we are fortunate to have one, of being at home in the world. Perhaps it raises the spectre that we are nothing but brains in a vat, deluded, as in *The Matrix*, into supposing that what is really a fiction of another's making is our objectively existing world.

In fact, though, scepticism does not imply that we are out of touch with things. Thus, properly understood, scepticism does not threaten our sense of being at home in the world. The sceptical thesis, after all, is not that most or even much of what we believe is false; it is only that none of our beliefs is a piece of knowledge.

There are plenty of ways in which we can lack knowledge. That's why the sceptical thesis that no one knows anything about anything doesn't imply that most of what we believe is false. Certainly we lack knowledge when we believe something that is false. But we might also lack knowledge though our belief is true. For instance, we don't know what we get right just by accident.

To know something, even something true, we have to have good reasons for thinking that it is true. You don't know that Sally is your friend, let's say, even if she is, unless you have evidence that she is. You don't know that Sally is your friend even if she is and you have evidence that she is, if you also have evidence suggesting she isn't.

Whether a sceptic thinks we are out of touch with reality will depend on her argument why we don't know anything. Arguments that we don't know anything because our beliefs are all or mostly false will, of course, imply that we are out of touch. Arguments that we don't know anything because none of our beliefs is well enough evidenced to be a piece of knowledge, on the other hand, will be neutral on the question.

So let's suppose we are sceptics of the second sort, sceptics, that is, who believe that no one knows anything because no one has a supporting argument good enough to warrant her belief as knowledge. Do we have reason, consistent with our scepticism and our argument for it, to think we are not out of touch with reality? Do we have reason, that is, to think that though we know nothing, still, most of our beliefs are true?

Donald Davidson, a recent American philosopher (1917 – 2003), has an intriguing set of arguments supposed to show that we cannot be massively mistaken about the world, at least not about the objects with which we are in close causal contact. Davidson himself thought his

arguments were anti-sceptical, but it seems to me that they are perfectly consistent with the thesis that no one knows anything.

Imagine you are with a person and neither of you speaks a language the other understands. You could, in principle, come to understand that person, at least if he wasn't entirely uncooperative. You would have to begin by assuming that most of what the other believes about the objects and events in your common environment is true. Under this assumption, you would look for correlations between noises or gestures he makes and objects or states of affairs in your common environment. These correlations would suggest hypotheses about what his words and sentences mean. You would test these hypotheses and, through testing, refine them until you were proficient in interpreting what he said.

You would begin by assuming that most of what the other person believes is true, and, through the process of interpretation, come to confirm that assumption. You could not, that is, ever come both to understand him and to judge him massively mistaken about the objects and events on which you based your interpretation.

One might suppose that this shows only that the two of you are in massive agreement, not that you are both right. His beliefs, after all, are mainly true by your lights, but perhaps your lights are dim. Well, then, bring in a third person, a fourth, a fifth.... All will turn out to be in massive agreement. Since nothing depends on who all these people are, it cannot be a mere coincidence that you all judge each other to be massively correct about what's in front of you.

We can see that it is no coincidence just by reflecting on what a belief is. A belief about an occurrence with which one is in close sensory contact is a state of mind caused by an event and that then, perhaps, guides one's action in that environment. The belief that the ball is coming toward one is caused by the ball's coming toward one and, in turn, causes one to move out of the ball's way. For the most part, such beliefs have the propositional content they do, then, because the proposition is true.

Even should we accept that we know nothing, we can still maintain, then, on good grounds, that most of what we believe is true.

Can we, then, deny with reason that we might be brains in a vat? No, we cannot. Davidson's argument, if it succeeds, shows only that if we are brains in a vat, most of what we believe about our vat world is true. That we cannot be massively mistaken doesn't imply that we can't be mistaken about this or that, even about something as important as whether we are brains in a vat.