

Chapter 7

No One Knows Anything about the World External to Her Mind

You do not know anything about anything—or, at least, about pretty well anything. (Maybe you know a few things about the present contents of your mind and maybe you know some elementary facts of arithmetic, but that’s about all.) No one else knows anything much about anything, either. That no one knows much about anything is the contention we will explore in this part of the book.

Our topic is scepticism about knowledge of the world external to one’s mind. The sceptical thesis is: No one knows anything about the external world (not even that an external world exists). No one, that is, knows of any proposition supposedly about things in the world external to her own mind whether that proposition is true.

1. The evil scientist argument for the sceptical thesis

Why should we think that no one knows anything about objects or events around her, not even that there are any such objects or events? Take a pen or a pencil or a book or anything else nearby that you can hold in your hand. Now speak the following argument to yourself.

1. If I know that I am presently holding a pen in my hand, then I can know that no evil scientist is deceiving me into falsely believing that I am presently holding a pen in my hand.

2. I cannot know that no evil scientist is deceiving me into falsely believing that I am presently holding a pen in my hand.

Therefore: 3. I cannot know that I am presently holding a pen in my hand.

Therefore: 4. I do not know that I am presently holding a pen in my hand.

5. I’m just one epistemic agent among others, and the proposition that I am presently holding a pen in my hand is just one of many propositions about the objects and events around me. Anyone else and any other proposition supposedly about things in the external world would have worked just as well.

Therefore: 6. No one knows of any proposition supposedly about things in the external world whether that proposition is true.

The inference in this argument from statements 1 and 2 to statement 3 has the following form:

1. If p then q.

2. Not-q

Therefore: 3. Not-p

This is a valid inference. (It is known by logicians as *modus tollens*, which means “in the mode of denial,” or as denying the consequent.) For any argument that has this form, if the premises of that argument are true, so, too, is the conclusion of that argument. Test it

yourself! Find two sentences, one for p and one for q , and try to construct an argument in which both “If p , then q ” and “not- q ” are true but “not- p ” is false. (It can’t be done.)

Since the argument from statements 1 and 2 to statement 3 is valid, one cannot both accept the premises of that argument and reject the conclusion. Anyone who accepts the premises as true must accept the conclusion as true.

Statement 4 validly follows from statement 3. If one cannot know something, knowing it is impossible; one, then, does not know it.

The inference from statements 4 and 5 to statement 6 is not as straightforward as the inference from statements 1 and 2 to statement 3. That is because statement 5 is actually a set of statements rather than a single statement. Nonetheless, statement 5 enables us to generalize from 4. Statement 5 says that you and the pen were both chosen at random, such that anyone else and anything else would have worked as well in the previous argument to show that that person doesn’t know that particular thing. If that is true, then we can generalize to all people and all propositions about things in the world of physical objects and events. The inference from statements 4 and 5 to statement 6 is, then, also valid. So, if statements 4 and 5 are true, so too must be statement 6. You cannot accept both statements 4 and 5 and then reject statement 6.

If there is anything wrong with the above argument for the sceptical thesis that no one knows anything about the world beyond her own mind, it must concern one or another of the undefended premises. If you are to reject the conclusion of this argument—if you think that you or, at least, someone somewhere knows something about something—, you must show one or another of statements 1, 2, and 5 to be false.

2. An argument in favour of the first premise of the sceptical argument

Statement 1, the first premise of the argument, is that if you know that you are presently holding a pen in your hand, then you can know that no evil scientist is deceiving you into falsely believing that you are presently holding a pen in your hand. Is this statement true? If a person knows some proposition p , then that person has a justified true belief that p . (If you know that grass is green, then grass is green, you believe that grass is green, and you are well justified in believing that grass is green.) So, if you know that you are presently holding a pen, then you believe truly that you are presently holding a pen. Now, if your belief that you are presently holding a pen is true, then it is not false. Thus, if you know that you are presently holding a pen, it is not false that you are presently holding a pen. But, if one is *deceived* into believing something, then one’s belief is *false*. (One cannot be deceived into believing something true.) Therefore, if your belief is not false, you cannot have been deceived into believing it.

This line of reasoning is available to you when you reflect on what it is to know that you are presently holding a pen in your hand. Once you have worked through this reasoning to the conclusion that if your belief that you are presently holding a pen in your hand is true, then you cannot have been deceived into believing that you are presently holding a pen in your hand, you can note that if you know that you are presently holding a pen in your hand, you can also know that you are not being deceived into believing that you are presently holding a pen in your hand. When you know some one thing, then, you can know, just by thinking about it, this second thing: you are not being deceived about the first thing.

It would seem, then, that the first statement in the sceptical argument is true. If you know that you are presently holding a pen in your hand, then you can know that no evil scientist is deceiving you into falsely believing that you are presently holding a pen in your hand.

3. An argument in favour of the second premise of the sceptical argument

Statement 2, the second premise of the sceptical argument, is that you cannot know that no evil scientist is deceiving you into falsely believing that you are presently holding a pen in your hand. Is this premise true?

To know that no evil scientist is deceiving you into falsely believing that you are presently holding a pen in your hand, you need to have evidence that you are not being deceived. You set out to collect such evidence. First, you make sure that you are awake and not dreaming. And that you are not hallucinating. And that you are not strapped into a virtual reality machine. Then you check your eyes to make sure they are working well. You check what you take to be the pen in your hand to make sure it is a pen and not some clever mockup, and you check your hand to make sure it is a hand and that it is yours. You examine the room carefully for mirrors, smoke, wires, a control panel....

But if *there is* an evil scientist bent on deceiving you, then the evidence you find that supports your belief that you are not being deceived is itself *part of the deception*.

So, it appears, you cannot know that you are not being deceived into falsely believing that you are presently holding a pen in your hand.

4. The external world

The sceptical thesis, again, is that no one knows anything about the external world (not even that an external world exists). What is the external world, and why does the argument apply only to propositions (supposedly) about it?

The external world is the world of objects and events outside one's thoughts, what we take to be the physical world. If one's thoughts are themselves physical events, then the external world is just a part of the physical world, though a very large part of it.

Beliefs about the following are not beliefs about the external world:

1) Beliefs about what you believe or feel or intend

I'm thinking about France.

I believe that France is across the Atlantic.

I'm starting to feel warm.

I intend to sit down.

2) Beliefs about the meanings of your words

Anything that can be bought has monetary value.

The word "lion" names a species of large cat, the adult males of which typically have a large mane.

3) Beliefs about mathematical objects and relations

Triangles are tri-lateral.

$$2 + 7 = 9.$$

One square root of 25 is -5.

The sceptical thesis with which we are concerned is neutral with respect to beliefs from these three categories. Maybe beliefs about these things can count as knowledge, maybe they can't.

Perhaps we can know that we are thinking about France when we are thinking about France. Perhaps we can know that we intend to sit down when we intend to sit down. Perhaps we can know that anything that can be bought has monetary value. Perhaps we can know that $2 + 7 = 9$. Or perhaps we can't. What we cannot know according to the sceptical thesis at issue, though, is that France is across the Atlantic, that lions live in Africa, that yield signs are triangular, and on and on forever.

5. *Of course I know things about the external world!*

"The thesis that no one knows anything about the external world is incredible! It simply cannot be believed! Of course we know lots of things about the external world. To think otherwise is just absurd. (I'm dropping this course if it doesn't get serious soon.)"

Maybe one is sympathetic to the following argument:

1. If I know that I am presently holding a pen in my hand, then I can know that no evil scientist is deceiving me into falsely believing that I am presently holding a pen in my hand.

2. I *do* know that I am presently holding a pen in my hand!

Therefore: 3. I can know that no evil scientist is deceiving me into falsely believing that I am presently holding a pen in my hand.

But what is one's ground for asserting the second premise, the statement that one does know that one is presently holding a pen in one's hand? Saying it loudly and firmly and with all the conviction in the world is not to give an epistemic reason for thinking it true. Nor is banging on the table as one says it. Indeed, one seems simply dogmatic on insisting on statement 2. Does one *know* one is *not* mistaken about one's presently holding a pen? Does one know that one's evidence that one is holding a pen is good enough for one's belief to count as knowledge? Just insisting that one knows that one is presently holding a pen (damn it!) is not the same as supplying adequate answers to these questions.

One's reaction that nothing could be more absurd than that no one knows anything is heartfelt and sincere. You may very well be convinced in your heart of hearts that scepticism is false, that people do know things. And you might be right. The philosophical task, though, is to *explain* how scepticism is false or absurd. After first recoiling in horror from scepticism, one must get down to work. How is it possible that you or anyone else in fact do or does know anything? Can you show that knowledge is possible?

6. *The argument from dreams*

Here is a second argument that no one knows anything about the world external to his or her own mind. In what ways is this argument similar to the evil scientist argument and in what

ways is it different? Suppose we find a devastating criticism of the evil scientist argument. Would there be an analogous criticism of the dream argument, one just as devastating to it? Or does the fact that the first concerns the possibility of an evil scientist deceiving us while the second concerns the possibility that we are sleeping make a difference to how they can be criticised?

Again, take in hand a pen:

1. If I know that I am presently holding a pen in my hand, then I can know that I am not asleep and dreaming that I am presently holding a pen in my hand.

2. I cannot know that I am not asleep and dreaming that I am presently holding a pen in my hand.

Therefore: 3. I cannot know that I am presently holding a pen in my hand.

Therefore: 4. I do not know that I am presently holding a pen in my hand.

5. I'm just one epistemic agent among others, and the proposition that I am presently holding a pen in my hand is just one of many propositions about the objects and events around me. Anyone else and any other proposition supposedly about things in the external world would have worked just as well.

Therefore: 6. No one knows of any proposition supposedly about things in the external world whether that proposition is true.

Suppose you are asleep and dreaming that you are holding a pen in your hand. Suppose also that in fact you are holding a pen in your hand (while you sleep and dream), and that it is because you are holding a pen in your hand that you are dreaming that you are holding a pen in your hand (your holding that pen is causally responsible for your dreaming that you are holding a pen). Suppose the pen in your dream image is just like the pen that you would see were you to be wide awake looking at the pen in your hand. Is it possible that, in this scenario, you know that you are holding a pen in your hand?