

Chapter 9

The Significance of Scepticism

Neither you nor anyone else knows much at all, if anything, about the world independent of her or his mind, not even that there is any such world. That is the thesis of scepticism about knowledge of the external world.

The thesis itself does not imply anything about why it is that no one knows anything about the external world. It says just that no one does know anything.

Recall what it is to know something. For S to know that p is for S to believe truly and on excellent grounds that p. If the thesis of scepticism is true, then, it might be true because any one of these three necessary conditions is rarely or never fulfilled. There are at least three very different routes to scepticism.

Perhaps, then, no one knows anything because nothing anyone believes is true. That seems incredible. Surely when a person holds true a proposition that contradicts a proposition that another person holds true, one of them is right and one of them is wrong and, so, one of them has a true belief. Still, one might wonder whether propositions can ever really get entirely right what they are about. This is a worry about the adequacy of language to reality. Words are one thing, reality is another. One might attempt to argue that language can never get things completely right, that words inevitably deform what they are about or that talk inevitably misses something significant. Thus, since a proposition is true only if it gets what it describes right, and no proposition gets things right, no proposition is true, not even one or the other of contradictory propositions. (No proposition is ever *fully* true; perhaps one of a pair of contradictory propositions will be more true or less false than the other.) If this line of thought is correct, then no one knows anything about the external world for no belief about the external world is (fully) true. At least no belief about the external world that can be expressed by a proposition is true. Perhaps there is knowledge, but it is wordless.

Or, perhaps no one knows anything because no one believes anything. A person impressed by neurophysiological research on the brain and behaviour, and who notes the absence of talk about beliefs in this research, might suppose that the concept of belief is empty, that nothing in the real world answers to it. The concept of belief is much like those of witch or phlogiston, she might conclude. If knowledge is justified true belief and there are no beliefs, then there is no knowledge. Such a one might not be a sceptic, though. She would likely instead reject the contention that knowledge has something to do with justified true belief. Necessary, if not also sufficient, conditions for having knowledge, she would say, are to be given using the concepts of neurophysiology, not the concepts of a discredited folk theory.

We will say nothing about arguments for scepticism about knowledge that concern either the possibility that no proposition is true or that no state is actually a state of believing something. The arguments for the sceptical thesis we have encountered have to do with the justification condition. These arguments (the one from Agrippa's trilemma, the evil scientist argument, and the argument from dreaming, at least when the second premise in the latter two

arguments is defended on the grounds that we are not justified in believing its negation) seek to show us that no matter how good our evidence is in favour of a target belief or how strong is our reasoning to that belief, our evidence is not good enough and our reasoning is not strong enough for the target belief to count as something we know.

The sceptical contention, either by itself or together with arguments that concern the justification condition, does not imply that most, or much, or even anything we believe is false (except, of course, our belief that we know things). It implies, rather, that even if all our beliefs are true, still we don't know anything. We can know of no true belief we have that it is true, for our reasons for thinking it true cannot be good enough to establish it as true.

Back in Chapter 7, the first chapter on scepticism about knowledge in this book, a disgruntled and annoyed student sounded off, telling us to get real, to get serious, to stop wasting people's time on the absurd idea that no one knows anything about anything external to her or his own mind. We will in the present chapter address our classmate's concern that scepticism is a trivial or frivolous problem and that discussing it is silly or worse. We will try to say something about in what lies the interest or significance of scepticism. But we will take up two other problems first.

1. No evidence, some evidence, excellent evidence

No one is well enough justified in believing something about the external world for that belief to count as a piece of knowledge. Nonetheless, we have been assuming, one can be better or worse justified in believing something about the external world. You are justified in believing that presently you are reading a page of a philosophy text, though you are not well enough justified in believing you are for your belief to count as knowledge, at least if scepticism is true. You would be entirely unjustified in believing on what you currently take to be evidence that presently you are not reading a page of a philosophy text.

Are we right to make this assumption, that one can be better justified in believing that *p* than believing that not-*p* or even in withholding belief whether *p*? Or do the sceptical arguments we have considered so far imply or suggest that one is always unjustified in believing whatever one believes?

Perhaps we could construct a sceptical argument to the conclusion that no one is any more justified in believing any one thing than in believing anything else, even the opposite. That conclusion would mean that we are always unjustified in believing what we do, whatever we believe, on whatever evidence we believe it. But the arguments we have considered so far give us no reason to accept this sceptical view of justification.

It is consistent with the arguments we have encountered to the conclusion that no one knows anything that we are fairly well justified epistemically in believing some of the things we believe, less well justified epistemically in believing others, and sometimes downright unjustified epistemically in believing something. It is consistent with the arguments we have encountered that you are quite well justified in believing that presently you are reading a page in a philosophy text and that you would be absolutely unjustified in believing otherwise (on the same evidence).

You are fairly well justified in believing that presently you are reading a page in a philosophy text because the proposition that you are fits very well within the body of other propositions you believe. Other propositions you believe can be arranged into arguments that

have it as their conclusion. These lines of argument will, it is true, if Agrippa's trilemma holds, each either recede infinitely, halt arbitrarily, or circle back on itself. But at least that belief has a place within these lines of argument. The proposition that presently you are not reading a page in a philosophy text, though, does not sit well among the rest of what you believe. It might be true that presently you are not reading a page in a philosophy text. Even if it is, you would be entirely unjustified in believing it. It is not supported by any argument that takes propositions you believe as premises.

It is because some propositions fit very well with your current beliefs and some fit well, while some fit loosely, not enjoying any support from them, and some positively clash with them, that we can speak of one being more or less justified in believing something and being not at all justified in believing something else. That a proposition coheres well with other propositions one believes means that one is well justified epistemically in believing it; a proposition that lacks coherence with the others one believes, then, is a proposition one is not justified in believing. Or, at least, this is true so long as that a belief coheres well with other beliefs gives that belief a presumption of truth. We will consider an argument that coherence is indeed a mark of truth two chapters hence.

2. The sceptical thesis cannot be sincerely asserted

"The sceptic says that no one knows anything about the external world and the sceptic means what he says. And the sceptic gives arguments in favour of what he says. So the sceptic is asserting sincerely, and on the basis of reasons, that no one knows anything about the external world. But to assert sincerely on the basis of reasons that something is true is to claim that one knows it to be true. Thus, in sincerely asserting the sceptical thesis on the basis of reasons, the sceptic contradicts himself by claiming to know something. So the sceptical thesis that no one knows anything about the external world cannot be sincerely asserted, at least not if one has reasons for thinking it true. If a thesis cannot be sincerely asserted," this criticism concludes, "it cannot be believed, for it cannot be held to be true. Therefore, no one actually believes that scepticism is true."

Let us begin with this criticism's final argument and conclusion. Suppose that no one actually believes that the sceptical thesis is true, and no one believes it true because no one *can* believe it true. It does not follow that the sceptical thesis is not true.

In any case, the argument to the conclusion that the sceptic contradicts himself in speaking the sceptical thesis is badly flawed. The trouble comes with the idea that to assert something sincerely is to claim that one knows that it is true. That idea is false. One can say something and mean it but yet not claim to know it is true. If your sister asks you where her geography notebook is, you will say "It's on the kitchen table." You mean what you say and you believe that it is on the kitchen table. "Do you *know* that it's there?" she asks. "No," you reply, "I don't *know* that it is. But I think I saw it there this morning." You've asserted that her geography notebook is on the kitchen table, and you have done so on the basis of reasons, but you have not in doing so claimed to know that it is there.

A convinced sceptic believes that the sceptical thesis is true, but in stating the sceptical thesis she is not claiming to know that it is true. By arguing for the sceptical thesis the sceptic is simply proposing that we are fairly well justified in believing that it is true—more justified in believing that it is true than in believing that it is false.

The sceptic says, “No one knows anything about the external world, not even that there is any such world. I believe it true that no one knows anything, but I do not know that it is true. Maybe it isn’t. No one knows anything about the external world, not even that no one knows anything about the external world.” There is nothing paradoxical or puzzling in believing or saying this.

3. The significance of scepticism for philosophy

What is at stake here? What is the point of discussing scepticism? Is the problem of scepticism about knowledge of the external world anything other than a silly intellectual waste of time?

Scepticism is a philosophical topic, but it might also have implications for the art of living well, at least for some of us. In this section we will discuss the significance of scepticism just in connection with philosophy.

Problems that we call philosophical often arise when we notice a tension in our thought. We believe one thing and we believe another thing, and we notice that the two things we believe do not fit together entirely well. Philosophical inquiry and reflection appeals to those of us who are disturbed by the tensions we feel among our beliefs and who want to resolve or remove them. We hope through philosophical inquiry and reflection to come to an understanding of things in which all of what we believe fits together harmoniously.

The problem of scepticism might arise for a person out of a tension in his thought. If the tension he feels disturbs him and he wants to remove it, he will be inclined to think philosophically about knowledge and justification and related matters.

The tension in thought that goes by the name *the problem of scepticism* can arise this way: We notice that we believe that we know plenty of things about a lot of stuff. We ourselves and just about everybody else, we think, knows a great deal about what is going on in the world around them. But we also notice that we believe that we know only those things that we are very well justified epistemically in believing. We believe that if we can entertain doubts about whether we are well justified epistemically in believing what we do, and that if we can entertain doubts about whether what we believe is true, then really we don’t know what we think we know, even if what we think we know is true. And, it turns out on reflection, we can entertain doubts about whether we are well justified in believing what we do. So our belief that we know things appears to conflict with what is implied by our beliefs about the nature of knowledge, specifically by our belief that knowing something requires meeting high standards of justification.

Note that no one actually need be a sceptic—that is, need believe that the thesis of scepticism about knowledge of the external world is true—for scepticism to be a proper and compelling philosophical concern. Our task is to resolve a tension, or at least to try to, and that doesn’t require that we debate some real or imaginary opponent who doubts we know anything. Scepticism would be a problem in philosophy even were no one to hold that the thesis of scepticism is true.

But what to do? How are we to resolve this tension in our thinking?

The problem of scepticism is a *philosophical* problem as it appears there is nothing we could learn by investigating the world that will help us to resolve this tension. We cannot

look to experience or to science for help. We must instead examine our concepts of knowledge and justification and follow the arguments where they lead.

1) We might find that we were right both that we know things and that to know something is to meet very high standards of epistemic justification. We might, that is, find that both of the beliefs we thought were in tension actually repose together well.

2) Or we might find that we cannot remove the tension except by abandoning one or other of our beliefs. Perhaps we are wrong to conceive of epistemic justification as we have conceived of it—in a way, that is, that invites Agrippa's trilemma. Or perhaps we are wrong to think that knowledge requires meeting high standards or that it is difficult to meet the high standards knowledge requires. In any of these ways, we keep our belief that we know things, but we do so by abandoning or altering our beliefs about being epistemically justified in believing something.

3) Or we might find that the sceptical thesis that no one knows anything about objects or events external to her mind is true. We might not be able in good conscience to remove the tension in our thinking except by abandoning our belief that we know things. Wanting to remain in good conscience, we become sceptics. For if knowledge requires meeting high standards of epistemic justification, and we come to accept that we cannot meet these standards, then we can resolve the tension plaguing us only by giving up the conviction that we have knowledge.

Right now, at this stage of our discussion, all three options are open. We have not ventured far enough yet to be able to rule any out any one of them. Maybe we know things even though knowledge requires meeting high standards of epistemic justification, maybe we know things but labour under some mistaken idea regarding justification, or maybe the sceptic is right.

If we come to think that the sceptical thesis is true, then we will need to alter or give up many of our ideas about belief, inquiry, and justification. Even if we properly come to dismiss the sceptical thesis as false, we will have acquired a much better understanding of epistemic concepts. Either way, we will have gone a long way toward constructing for ourselves a philosophically satisfying account of the world and our place in it.

Of course, though, not everyone is interested in having a philosophically satisfying account of the world. Not everyone feels tensions in their thought or cares when they do (one can resolve a problem to one's satisfaction by paying it no mind or forgetting about it). Scepticism might be worth considering only to those who are interested in having an account of the world. But that only people interested in philosophy care about the topic of scepticism is of no more significance to us who are interested in philosophy than is the fact that *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* astounds and moves only those people who care about painting is to those people interested in painting.

4. The significance of scepticism for the art of living well

A happy person, say the ancient Greek philosophers, is a tranquil person, a person of calm temperament, particularly one whose tranquillity cannot be disturbed and who understands that it cannot be disturbed. But how is one to become tranquil, and how is one to become imperturbable in one's tranquillity? —These are the two central questions of the art of living,

at least according to ancient Greek philosophy. No one who fails to answer them correctly can be happy.

Is believing that no one knows anything a source of imperturbable tranquillity? Or is the idea that one knows very little if anything at all actually disconcerting, perturbing, even frightening? For many of us, the sceptical thesis is shocking. Thinking it might be true is terrifying. A sceptic is a worried person, not a happy one.

That the thought that one knows nothing robs one of happiness might be the majority view among philosophers. But the opposite view, that recognizing that one knows nothing is a necessary part of happiness, commands a sizeable minority, one armed with intriguing arguments.

Pyrrho of Elis (365-275 BCE), a philosopher of the final centuries of ancient Greek civilization, the period of history called the Hellenistic Era, was admired by all for his strength and calm under adversity and for the deep peace of mind he appeared always to enjoy. Pyrrho thought that a major source of one's unhappiness is one's own dogmatism. A dogmatic person is one who feels certain that she is right and who thumps the table to make her point when she has run out of arguments with which to convince her opponents, as we all quickly do. It is so important to her to be right—or, rather, not to have been wrong—that finding herself wrong distresses her greatly. A dogmatic person, believing that she knows the truth, will dismiss out of hand views that conflict with hers. She will not engage in discussion or reasoned argument with those who believe differently. As such, she will not be good company, and thus will lack close friends. Being disturbed to find that one is wrong deprives one of good feeling, as does noticing that one is friendless. Certainly we are all prone to be dogmatic, at least from time to time. But since dogmatism is the source of at least a couple sorts of bad feeling, to be happy we must learn not to be dogmatic. That is, we must learn to hold our opinions lightly, always aware that we might be wrong, that our arguments never establish their conclusions, even if we happen to be right in our opinions. Happiness requires that we be sceptics.

Epicurus (341-270), a younger contemporary of Pyrrho, admired Pyrrho greatly and sought to find for himself the same sort of tranquillity and peace of mind that Pyrrho enjoyed. But Epicurus could not believe that scepticism was the right path to happiness. On the contrary, Epicurus thought, as most philosophers who have come after him have thought, that to be a sceptic would be to live in fear and misery. A sceptic would never know what to believe, where to go, what to do. He would live daily with uncertainty. Even thinking that scepticism might be true is disturbing, for to think that it might be true is to imagine that one has no firm grip on anything around one. Fortunately, Epicurus maintained, knowledge is fairly easily obtained. We just have to look at things with open eyes and clear heads. What we know must be true, so we can be dogmatic about what we know without putting anything that matters to us at risk. Since we won't be caught speaking falsely when we speak what we know, we won't be disappointed or embarrassed by our having been sure of it. The trick is not to be mistaken that one knows it, but that is a trick that can be learned, or so Epicurus tells us.

Pyrrho and Epicurus agree that a happy life is a life of imperturbable tranquillity or serenity. And both agree that fear destroys tranquillity. So both see the art of living as

concerned centrally with living without fear. Pyrrho and Epicurus disagree, though, about what enables one to live without fear.

An important source of fear, says Epicurus, is the thought that one will fail to satisfy one's needs, finding oneself hungry, thirsty, cold, diseased, and preyed upon. And if one doesn't believe that one knows how to satisfy one's needs, one will have the thought that one will fail to satisfy one's needs; thus, if one doesn't think one knows things, one will live in fear. We need to be sure that we can know things about the external world, then, Epicurus concluded, for otherwise we will live poorly.

An important source of fear, says Pyrrho, is the thought that one will be embarrassed by one's mistakes and scorned by others as a dogmatic fool. And if one thinks one knows things about that of which one speaks, one will be embarrassed by one's mistakes and thought a fool; thus, if one thinks one knows things, one will live in fear. We need to divest ourselves of the idea that we know anything, then, Pyrrho concluded, for otherwise we will live poorly.

Who do you think is right—Pyrrho the sceptic or Epicurus the dogmatist? Remember, though, that scepticism's being a necessary part of a good life (if it is) is not evidence that the thesis of scepticism is true. Likewise, dogmatism's being a necessary part of a good life (if it is) is not evidence that the thesis of scepticism is false.

5. Scepticism and a flourishing society

Pyrrho and Epicurus are both concerned primarily about the individual and his or her own happiness. Might the matter of scepticism about knowledge of the external world also be of significance more broadly? Would it make any difference to our or any other society whether people tended to be sceptics regarding knowledge of the external world or to be convinced that they know things?

One thought is that it wouldn't make any difference one way or the other. A society of people who think no one knows anything about the external world would be no better and no worse than a society of people who think that people know lots of things about the external world. Even if the sceptical thesis is true, say those who think this way, it is unimportant and uninteresting, at least from a social perspective.

Suppose, then, just for the sake of understanding this line of thought, that one or another of the sceptic's arguments is sound or cogent and that the sceptical thesis is true. At most the sceptic has won a theoretical victory. We can admit that the sceptic is right without changing either our conception of the world, including our conceptions of ourselves and our relations to the world, or our practices of investigation, justification, and criticism. Scepticism, then, is a merely theoretical or academic issue, with no practical significance for society, at least according to this line of thought, for in a society in which scepticism is widely acknowledged as true, people will still speak of ideas being more or less well founded on evidence or experience and will be just as inclined as we are to put ideas to the test and to reject those that fail the test. Of course, while we in our society of non-sceptics would speak of the difference between knowledge and opinion, they in their society of sceptics would speak of the difference between well founded and ill founded opinion, having no use for the concept of knowledge. But this is a difference that makes no difference. They just have different names for the same old ideas and practices we have.

Another thought is that a society in which scepticism is widely accepted as true, whether indeed it is true or not, would be a very unattractive society. There would be no science in such a society, or any other sort of organized quest for the truth of things. People would not sound each other out on important matters. What would be the point of either science or debate? Science is concerned with producing knowledge. But, according to people in this society, there is no knowledge. Debate is concerned with establishing the truth.

But, according to people in this society, the truth cannot be established. As its members would lack all motivation to find answers and settle disputes, a society of sceptics would collapse under the weight of its ignorance and lethargy.

But why suppose that science and debate are about producing knowledge or establishing truth? Maybe they are just about giving us reason to think one way rather than another. Why think we will not bother to investigate things unless we believe that through our efforts we will establish the truth?

A third thought is that accepting that scepticism is true will make us better people and that, in turn, will make our society better. People who accept the sceptical thesis are more apt to notice evidence against what they believe and to be corrected by it than are people who hold on dogmatically to what they already believe. Sceptics are not threatened by criticism of their views for, after all, they do not claim to know they are right. Since they accept that anyone can be wrong about anything, they are not hurt to discover that they are wrong about something. They will be able to evaluate criticism dispassionately, not having any personal stake in seeing their current views vindicated. As well, they will be more tolerant of those in their society with whom they disagree than will the dogmatist. The dogmatist thinks she knows that the others are wrong and, so, she might be inclined to impose her views on those with whom she disagrees. The sceptic, on the other hand, says he doesn't know who is right, and so will be inclined to leave things unresolved while watching for new evidence. In short, a society of sceptics will be an attractively experimental, critical, and tolerant society.

But why suppose a society won't be harmed by interminable debate on matters important to its members and paralysed by the respect it gives to opposed opinions? There's much to be said in favour of social cohesion, even when the ideas and practices around which a society coheres are not known to be true. What matters is that they are widely accepted throughout a society. A society of sceptics will not be a cohesive society, one might think, and thus will forfeit all the benefits that come from social cohesion.

What would a society of sceptics about knowledge would look like? What would be its virtues and vices? Would our own society be better were people less sure of themselves, less dogmatic? These are, ultimately, questions to be answered through empirical investigation. Only by comparing those societies whose members were more-or-less sceptical about the possibility of knowledge with those whose members were more-or-less dogmatic can we hope to begin to answer them.

6. Another argument that no one knows anything about the external world

If you know of some proposition about the external world that it is true, then it is all right for you to be absolutely certain that that proposition is true. After all, if you know that it is true, it cannot be false, so you are entitled to be certain that it is true. But is it ever all right for you to be absolutely certain of a proposition that that proposition is true? No, it is never all right

for you to be absolutely certain of any proposition about the external world that it is true. To be certain of something is to be disagreeably dogmatic about it. Thus, given these two premises, you do not know of any proposition about the external world that it is true. You, though, were picked at random as an example of an epistemic agent for use in this argument. Any other epistemic agent would have worked just as well. Therefore, again, no one knows of any proposition supposedly about things in the external world whether that proposition is true.

The argument for scepticism in the above paragraph would be close to Pyrrho's heart, for it brings his concern with the ills of dogmatic directly into an argument for scepticism. Let us consider this argument carefully.

Its first premise is that if you know something, it is all right for you to be certain of it. Certainty is a psychological attitude. The premise states that it is all right for you to have that particular psychological attitude, to be in that state of mind, with regard to anything that you know. It is all right for you to have that particular psychological attitude maybe just because that attitude inevitably accompanies knowing something. To know something just is to be absolutely certain of it.

Consider the proposition "He knew that it was raining, but he wasn't certain that it was." Does this proposition seem well formed to you? Or does it seem off somehow? Your sense that it is not well formed, that there is something wrong with it, that no one could both know that it is raining and be uncertain whether it is raining, is best explained by the idea that the concept of knowing implies the concept of being certain. So, it seems, if you know of some proposition that it is true, you are certain that it is true. You know it, you are certain of it, and since because you know it you cannot possibly be uncertain of it, it is perfectly all right for you to be certain of it. Thus it follows that if you know of some proposition that it is true, then it is all right for you to be certain that that proposition is true.

But what about the second premise of this argument? According to that premise, it is never all right to be absolutely certain of anything. Why should we believe that premise?

To be certain of a proposition about the external world that it is true is to hold that no matter what happens next, whatever experience you have or testimony you hear, you are right that that proposition is true. To hold that no matter what happens next you are right is to be dogmatic about what you believe. But to be dogmatic is to set yourself up for embarrassing or belittling experiences and lessons. To be dogmatic is at least to have an inflated sense of the firmness of your epistemic grip on the world. It is never all right, though, to set yourself up for embarrassment or to have an inflated sense of your epistemic grip on the world. Therefore, it is never all right for you to be certain of any proposition about the external world that it is true.

The sense of "all right" in this argument is the prudential sense. It is all right prudentially to be absolutely certain regarding anything one knows, for one's certainty with regard to what one knows will not get one into trouble. It is not prudentially all right to be absolutely certain with regard to anything, for to be certain of something is to be dogmatic and one fares poorly by being dogmatic. At least, so according to the argument.

We have now looked at four arguments that no one knows anything about objects or events external to her or his own mind. The arguments, in the order they appeared, are: 1) the evil scientist argument; 2) the argument from dreams; 3) an argument from Agrippa's trilemma; 4) the argument from the imprudence of being certain. Each of these arguments concerns the justification requirement of knowledge. Each proposes that that requirement cannot be met. (None says anything about whether either the belief or the truth requirement can be met.)

The key argument here would seem to be the one from Agrippa's trilemma. The argument from Agrippa's trilemma seems to be the argument supporting the second premise of both the evil scientist argument and the argument from dreams. If we were to pursue the argument for the second premise of the certainty argument, we could find it there, too.

We should now understand each of these four arguments. Let us, then, begin to evaluate them.