

Chapter 11

Most of What We Believe Is True

Epicurus says that the thought that we know nothing is terrifying. One who supposes that maybe he doesn't know anything will be scared and worried. He will be scared and worried, Epicurus contends, because he will think that if he lacks knowledge of how to take care of himself, he will suffer and die. Fortunately, Epicurus adds, we do know a lot of things and it is fairly easy for us to distinguish what we know from what we merely suppose or opine or believe. It is good that scepticism is false, for if it were true life would be much riskier than it is, and it is good that philosophy can show us that scepticism is false, for unless we see that it is false we will live in worry.

Is Epicurus right that the thought that we know nothing is terrifying? Epicurus's idea seems to be that to know nothing would be to lack a firm grasp on how things are, and unless one has a firm grasp on how things are, one's practical pursuits will fail. Not knowing that there is milk in the fridge puts at risk one's pursuit of milk. (Thus, to think that scepticism might be true is to worry that one lacks a firm grasp on how things are and, for that reason, that one's practical pursuits will fail.)

Really, though, it is believing *falsely* and *only* believing falsely that puts one at risk of failure in one's practical pursuits. If your belief that the milk is in the fridge is true and you act on it, you will succeed in getting milk. It doesn't actually matter whether your belief counts as a piece of knowledge or not.

The thought that one knows nothing might be unpleasant or off-putting, perhaps because one feels diminished or humbled by it. But it needn't be and shouldn't be troubling. What *would* be troubling is the thought that our beliefs are always or even often false. *Then* we would be out of touch with things. *Then* we would be right to worry about whether we will secure our next meal. The sceptical thesis that no one knows anything about the world external to their minds does not, though, imply that much or even anything that we believe is false. It doesn't imply this even when combined with the claim that none of our beliefs is well enough supported by evidence to count as knowledge. And so we have no reason to be worried by the thought that it is true.

But wait! If indeed we know nothing, then, for all we know, most of our beliefs are false! Scepticism certainly does raise the possibility that we are out of touch with things, that how things in fact are is very different from how we think they are. True, scepticism doesn't imply that our beliefs are false, but it doesn't imply that they are not, either. On the other hand, if we do know things, then we know that at least some of our beliefs are true, and that is reassuring. If scepticism is true, we are deprived of that reassurance. If scepticism is true, we don't know whether what we believe is true or false. For all we know, the sceptic must say, most of what we believe is false. Epicurus is right: the thought that we know nothing is terrifying.

Does scepticism indeed imply that most of our beliefs could be false? No, not directly. From the fact (supposing it is a fact) that we don't know of any particular one of our

beliefs whether it is true we cannot conclude that all our beliefs could be false. That I don't know of any one competitor whether he came in last doesn't imply that all the competitors came in last. It is consistent with the claim that we don't know of any particular one of our beliefs whether it is true that all of them could be false, just as it is consistent with the claim that I don't know of any one competitor whether he came in last that all the competitors could have come in last. But in neither case does the truth of the claim ensure the truth of the possibility.

The two claims on the table appear to be independent of each other. The first is the sceptical claim that no one knows anything about the external world. The second is the troubling claim that most or all of our beliefs could be false. The first claim does not imply the second (the second doesn't imply the first, either). On the other hand, if we know things, the troubling claim that most of our beliefs could be false is false. So, if we don't know anything, we lack at least one argument that some of our beliefs are true. But because the two claims are independent, we might be able to reassure ourselves that at least some of our beliefs are true even if we are unable to establish that we actually know anything.

We can do even better than this. We can assure ourselves that most of what we believe is true. We can assure ourselves of this even if it is true that we don't know anything.

Scepticism about knowledge of the external world, at least when based on the claim that the justification condition for knowledge cannot be met, does not threaten our peace of mind. Or so at least the following argument would show if it is sound.

1. Understanding each other

We want to show that even if scepticism is true, even if we don't know anything much about objects and events external to our minds, still, most of what we believe about objects and events external to our minds is true. If we can show that most of what we believe is true, then we can think, in good conscience, that we have a firm epistemic grasp on the world. The thought that we don't know much will no longer trouble us.

One argument that most of what we believe is true begins from ideas about what it is to interpret another's words and to come to understand what that person believes, wants, and means to do. Suppose you are confronted with a person who speaks a language totally unlike any with which you are familiar. Let's call this person Carlos. You are face to face with Carlos, together with him in some environment. You have available to you as much time as you need to get to know him and understand what he is saying. How will you go about your task?

To understand the words Carlos speaks, you must look for correlations between the sounds he makes and the objects and events with which he is in close causal contact. (We are assuming that Carlos is speaking sounds. The same point would apply were he to speak using writing or hieroglyphs or sign language.) You hear a particular sound in one of the sentences he speaks when he is standing next to a muddy puddle, you hear that same sound in a different sentence spoken again near a muddy puddle; you tentatively assign that sound the meaning "mud." Having arrived at a body of correlations between types of sound and objects or events in the world, you then begin to experiment. You interact with Carlos speaking what you think are his words. When tasks you undertake with him go well, you have evidence that the hypotheses you have made with regard to his language are true; when they don't go well,

you have evidence that you have got his language wrong. Eventually, if all goes well, you come to understand Carlos's language and you understand what he believes and desires and intends by his actions. You understand these things, that is, at least as well as you understand what people who speak your language believe and desire and intend by their actions.

None of this would even get off the ground unless you made a basic assumption right at the start. The basic assumption that supports your attempt to understand him by finding correlations between the sounds he makes and the things around him is that most of what Carlos believes about the things around him is true. You assume that he applies his words to things correctly; only given that he applies his words to things correctly could you begin to look for regularities in his application of words to things. So, you as interpreter hold that most of what he, Carlos, the person you are attempting to interpret, believes must be true.

And you find that you are right. As you work your way into his language, you discover that your assumption was correct. Most of what Carlos believes indeed is true.

Most of what Carlos believes is true, you discover, because you find you are in agreement with him about the objects and events with which you are both in close causal contact. You find you are in agreement with him, which means that you find most of what he believes to be true—true by your lights, that is. Carlos is a true believer given your appreciation of what is true and false. Perhaps, then, we cannot conclude that most of what he believes is true. Perhaps we can conclude only that you and Carlos agree with each other about things in your common environment (for the most part you agree; you'll differ on some things). Perhaps both of you are mistaken, mistaken in the same way.

Let us suppose that you then encounter Betty, another person who speaks a language totally unknown to you. You are with Betty in some environment, free to interact with her. You begin to attempt to understand her language, to figure out what Betty believes and wants and intends. To work your way into her language and her thoughts, you assume that most of what Betty believes is true and, through this assumption, you come to find correlations between sounds and bits of your environment. You succeed to interpret Betty, which shows that you were right, that for the most part Betty's beliefs are true. Or, at least, true according to you.

Let us suppose that you then encounter Albert....

Then Albert sets out to understand Betty. He finds that most of what Betty believes is true, at least by his, Albert's, lights. Betty sets out to understand Carlos. She finds that most of what Carlos believes is true, at least by her, Betty's, lights. And all of them think that most of what you believe is true, too.

The point here is that none of us could find anyone else massively mistaken in his or her beliefs about the objects and events with which that person is in close causal contact. Anyone at all who speaks a language will be found to be in the main a true believer—at least, again, according to our lights.

We all agree with each other, at least for the most part, about where the things in our common environment are, about which are bigger than which, about which are the same colour, about which are hard and which soft, which have sharp edges and which dull edges, and about a whole lot of other things. But though we all agree with each other, maybe all of us are wrong.

Now let us suppose that Dawn enters our group. Dawn, we stipulate, just is right about how things are in our common environment. When Dawn believes that object A is on top of object B, then object A is on top of object B. Dawn never believes anything false about these matters. Dawn, though, has no special access to our language or thoughts; like us, she must work out what we mean and believe by collecting evidence and putting her hypotheses to the test. She's right about the goings-on in our section of space/time, but she is no better off than we are when it comes to figuring out what others mean by their words and what they believe.

So each of us attempts to understand the language Dawn speaks and Dawn attempts to understand the languages we speak. We all work to interpret each other by assuming that most of what the other believes is true and then by looking for correlations between bits of sound and bits of the world. We find that we agree massively with Dawn about how things are in our world and Dawn finds that she agrees with each of us. But, as we stipulated, Dawn's beliefs are true. Dawn's beliefs are simply true, not true just by someone's lights. Since we believe pretty well what Dawn believes, our beliefs must also in the main be true. When you agree with someone who is right, you, too, are right; we agree with Dawn, Dawn is right, so we, too, are right.

So long as we have beliefs, then, most of our beliefs must be true. We cannot be massively mistaken about how the world is, at least in regard to the objects and events with which we are in close causal contact. The fact that we are interpretable by others shows that most of what we believe is true.

Since most of what we believe is true, we are not out of touch with the world around us, even if we don't know much or anything about that world.

2. The content of belief

In order to be interpretable by others, we must evince a high degree of consistency in our application of words to things. For others to understand what we mean by our word "mouse," for instance, we need for the most part to apply it to mice and only to mice. As our application of it to things in the world becomes less and less consistent or more and more arbitrary, the idea that we mean anything at all by it becomes more problematic. Were we to apply it to things randomly it would no longer mean mouse; it would no longer mean anything at all.

Suppose you meet someone who applies his word "mouse" not to mice, but to baseballs. He does not call mice "mice", but he calls baseballs "mice." What does his word "mouse" mean? It does not mean what your word "mouse" means. Rather, it means what your word "baseball" means. When your new friend says "Here, catch this mouse," you put on your catcher's mitt.

Our words take their meanings from the things to which they are regularly applied (at least many of our words do). Our beliefs, also, have the content they do because of the sorts of objects and events that cause them. What you believe about the objects and events around you has much to do with how these objects and events are affecting you. When we see you pulling a chair back from a table, we assign you beliefs concerning chairs and pulling and tables.

It is because many of a person's beliefs have the content they do in virtue of being caused by objects and events within that person's environment that most of those beliefs cannot be false. Beliefs are, in the main, true in virtue of their position in causal chains from the environment to you and back to the environment in the form of your actions.

3. Methods of investigation

Some of our beliefs concern the nature of evidence, how to go about collecting and evaluating evidence, and what it is to be justified in believing something. Key here is our belief that the better a proposition coheres with the propositions we already believe, the more likely it is that that proposition is true. This belief underlies our sense that even when we cannot properly say we know of some proposition that it is true, still, we can properly say that we are well justified in believing that it is true. We are well justified in believing that it is true because it fits well with what we already believe. If its negation conflicts with what we already believe, we are well justified not to believe its negation. Further, since one proposition can fit less well within our set of beliefs than another proposition, we can properly hold that we are better justified in believing the first proposition than in believing the second.

A proposition that coheres well with the other propositions that we believe has a presumption of truth in its favour. Are we right to believe this? —In Chapter 9 we supposed we are right to believe it. Because it is true, we said, we can avoid thinking that scepticism about knowledge of the external world robs us of the distinction between being well justified in believing something and being poorly justified in believing it. But are we right to believe that coherence with beliefs gives a belief a presumption of truth?

We cannot be thoroughly mistaken in our beliefs about evidence and justification, or even often mistaken in them. They play an important role in helping us make our way around in the world. To the extent that we enjoy success in our endeavours, these beliefs pay their way. And, so, even if we do not know anything about the world external to our minds, we none the less can be better or worse justified in believing this or that about that world.

4. Brains in a vat

The line of reasoning we have been following has it that even if it is true that no one knows anything about objects and events external to his or her own mind, still most of what that person believes is true. Moreover, most of that person's ideas about evidence and reason and justification are sound. He or she can be well justified in believing that, say, penguins eat fish, and he or she can understand that he or she is well justified in believing that penguins eat fish. If this line of reasoning is indeed sound, then scepticism about knowledge of the external world should not inspire in us the fear that we are out of touch with reality.

And yet this line of reasoning does not show that we are not victims of an evil scientist's illusions or that we are not brains in a vat or that we are not in the Matrix. Suppose that we are, then, brains in a vat, our neurons stimulated by electrical impulses generated by a giant supercomputer. Our brains are not, in this fantasy, within our skulls, nor are our neurons stimulated by photons bouncing off objects. The world is very much different than we think it is. If the line of reasoning we have been following is sound, then, in this fantasy, where things are very much different than we think they are, still most of what we believe is true. For the most part, our beliefs are about what causes them; in this fantasy, then, our

beliefs are mainly about states of the vat and computer. It is the vat and the computer that are described in the propositions we entertain and believe. If we are brains in a vat, we are wrong about a particular deep feature of our world—specifically, we are wrong that our world is not a vat world. This, however, is to be no more massively mistaken about the external world than we would be if our (non-vat) scientists concluded that matter isn't composed of atoms after all, but is infinitely divisible. For us in the vat, rocks are just those things to which we regularly apply our word "rock," and most of our beliefs about rocks ("rocks" in our language) are true. *One* of our beliefs about rocks isn't true, of course—our belief that rocks are not states of a computer. But to have one or even a few false beliefs about rocks isn't to be massively mistaken about rocks. Even if you are a brain in a vat, or a person living in the Matrix, still, right now, your belief that (again, understood in your language) you are reading a page in textbook of philosophy is true.

That most of what we believe is true has significant implications for the first premise of the evil scientist argument for scepticism. That premise, remember, is that if you can know that right now you are reading a page in a book of philosophy, then you can know that you are not being deceived by an evil scientist into believing that you are reading a page in a book of philosophy. This premise suggests that if your reality is one constructed for you by an evil scientist, then nothing you believe about that reality can count as something you know. But maybe this premise isn't true. You are reading a page in a book of philosophy (in the sense in which you understand that claim, of course). Let us suppose that you have adequate evidence that you are doing what you understand as reading a page in a book of philosophy for that belief to count as knowledge. In that case, you know that you are reading a page in a book of philosophy. But reflecting on that knowledge does not entitle you to conclude that your reality is not a reality constructed for you by some evil scientist. You know lots about your reality, let us suppose; but you do not know at least one interesting fact about that reality—that, namely, it is a reality constructed for you by an evil scientist.

Of course, if your reality is not often a constructed reality, if you do not live in a vat or in the Matrix or generally under the control of the scientist, then, if the scientist has conjured an illusion for you, you are not reading a page in a book of philosophy though you think you are. But if you *are* living in a constructed reality, then most of what you believe about it is true and you are, as you would put it, reading a page in a book of philosophy.

That most of what you believe is true does not have anti-sceptical implications. It might well undercut the evil scientist argument for scepticism, or at least force the sceptic to revise that argument. (The sceptic might have to make it more like the possibility of dreaming argument, so that the deception we are to envision is local and transient, rather than global and permanent. Ask yourself, though: does the evil scientist argument require that your reality might be entirely a constructed one?) But it does not tell against the argument for scepticism that appeals to Agrippa's trilemma. At most, it renders scepticism less scary, less disconcerting.

Or does it? After all, even if most of your beliefs about the people you love are true, for all you know everyone you love is merely a feature of a reality that a bank of computers has constructed for you for its own strange purposes.