

## **The Possible World Machine: Essay 2**

David Clark

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### **Assess the significance of philosophical scepticism.**

Does philosophical skepticism (PS) make a significant contribution to philosophy? First let us gather a working definition of significance before we claim that PS is or isn't significant. A literal definition is 'the quality of being worthy of attention; importance' but importance varies based on context. Here our context is philosophical discussion, so let us consider what philosophy considers important. It has been put by Hume that the goal of Philosophy should be true belief, which I will take to be the pursuit of truth and certainty, given that to believe something without requiring faith requires a degree of certainty. Therefore, we can say that philosophical inquiry is significant if it provides truth and certainty.

Immediately this definition presents a problem for PS because at its core PS questions whether we can be certain about knowledge, about anything we hold to be true. Academic PS assents to the denial of knowledge, which is itself claiming certainty, the certainty that we cannot be certain about knowing anything. This is a self-defeating argument as it makes a claim on a foundation of truth whilst simultaneously undermining that foundation. Pyrronian skepticism realizes this and refuses to assent either way, holding fast to the view that using our perceptual tools we cannot claim any certainty, even the certainty that we cannot be certain.

The Socratic paradox 'I know that I know nothing' is an example of academic skepticism, for it is not possible to both know nothing and something. We could restate this to avoid the paradox and get to something closer to practical skepticism; 'I cannot assent to 100% certainty being possible' but for our practical lives we rarely need 100% certainty. We are bound by our human form to require a degree of assent to our perceptions of the world around us for the purposes of practical living, it simply is not practical to require absolute certainty before being able to take the simplest of actions. As an example, whilst contemplating the lack of certainty I can have about the truth of my surroundings I may tend to feel an unsettling anxiety, this I usually subdue by using my sensory input to make a strong cup of tea. This I think highlights that whilst we may explore skepticism to its most extreme it does not lead us to a place we can operate from entirely. Therefore, it is very tempting to suggest that it is of no significant use.

By removing the possibility of truth and certainty PS cannot hope to meet the definition of significance we have reached above. But perhaps our definition is too narrow.

Perhaps, if PS is correct and we cannot hope to find certainty in this world then maybe it is enough to further mans understanding of his world and experience. In this case, an understanding of the world as a human, a full and wide view, must include the fact that we cannot be sure that our perceptions and tools for analyzing the world are accurate. Without this understanding we are not seeing the whole picture. This view I think is a very sensible one, for example imagine you were asked to look through a broken and dirty telescope, the lens damaged in such a way as to distort whatever was viewed through it. Then you were asked to view through it a particular object and comment with certainty about the details of what you saw. You would be remis not to mention that the device you used was influencing your view and therefore your certainty. This, I suggest is no different from the human experience. We are born with a set of perceptual tools, we cannot choose any other type of natural tools or make use of anyone else's and we are forced to filter all our experiences through these tools. The wisest position is to include, in some part of your awareness, the understanding that you are being force-fed your information in this way. Although it may not be practical to apply this knowledge in every action it is perhaps enough to be aware of it.

In conclusion; PS cannot be seen as significant to philosophy if the goal of philosophy is to gain truth and certainty, because PS will not assent to such a goal being possible. But, once we acknowledge that truth and certainty may be out of reach we can settle on the goal of philosophy to be to further our understanding of the human condition. Here PS is significant because full understanding must include that our capacity to understand is limited. Man cannot have a complete knowledge of his world without it including the acknowledgement that he may know nothing at all. By doing this man has furthered his knowledge and understanding of the world and therefore PS has played a significant role in man's development. Whilst it may be potentially impractical PS is nevertheless a necessary component in our understanding of the human condition.