

Assess the significance of philosophical scepticism.

“Scepticism is the first step towards truth.” Denis Diderot

How can I know what is real? How can I trust what I know is true? Philosophical scepticism argues that we cannot know the answer to either of these questions and we should not claim that we can. True knowledge requires certainty and trust in the sources of our information. However, the only two sources of information we require for knowledge are not reliable and cannot be completely trusted. The first source, our senses, can distort information. For example objects that are farther away appear smaller than they actually are. Stars in the sky appear as small dots, many of which burnt out millions of years ago and no longer exist. Our other gateway to knowledge is our reason. Here we take information accumulated in the past from our senses and make inferences from it. This however has its own issues of reliability. Information gathered in the past through our senses is stored in our memory and our memory is far from perfect. We tend to forget simple, recent events such as where we left our car keys. In addition our reasoning abilities are not always reliable because we sometimes misunderstand the information. If someone tells me they are playing football next week in London I think I know their plans but when I later discover they are playing Canadian football in London, Ontario, I realize I misunderstood what they were saying and as a result I did not know. If we cannot be certain the only sources of our knowledge are reliable then we cannot be certain to know anything at all.

It was with this extreme form of scepticism that Descartes developed his arguments. He believed that even if our senses and reason were reliable we still could never know if what we experience is real. Descartes claimed “what is true to us may be false to an angel” therefore everything, even math, may be a lie. He used three examples to support his claim. First, he argued, we cannot prove when we are and when we are not dreaming. We can have “no conclusive indications by which waking life can be distinguished from sleep”. If we can’t prove we aren’t dreaming, we can’t ever be sure we are awake. However, Stroud argued that the state of dreaming and the state of being awake are not completely indistinguishable since we can never know more while dreaming than being awake.

Next Descartes raised the possibility of being insane. In the movie *Shutter Island*, U.S. Marshal Teddy Daniels investigated the disappearance of a patient at Ashecliffe Hospital for the criminally insane. As the investigation progressed Daniels’ recurring nightmares about his dead ex-wife and specific incidents at the hospital caused him to question reality. The movie ended with the dramatic discovery that Daniels was not a US Marshall assigned to a case but actually a patient at the hospital. He had created the persona so he did not have to deal with the pain of remembering how he had killed his ex-wife. Daniels did not know he was insane. Throughout the movie he clearly saw people and events that in reality did not exist. We can never be completely certain we are not insane and therefore must admit that we can never truly know if our experiences are real.

The last possibility raised by Descartes was that of an evil deceiver. We can never know anything because we can never rule out the idea that an evil demon is creating a false reality for us. He argued that he could not rule out that “there is an evil demon, supremely powerful and cunning, who works as hard as he can to deceive me...”. Even if advances in science and philosophy discovered a way for us to know when we were dreaming and if we were insane, we would still be forced to admit that we can never rule out the possibility of Descartes’ evil deceiver.

The main criticism of philosophical scepticism is that if the sceptic cannot know if anything is true, how can they know that scepticism itself is true? Reid argued that the sceptic cannot since our senses and reason are not reliable. Either the sceptic is right, and since we cannot trust our reason, we cannot trust the sceptic’s conclusion, or the sceptic is wrong and we cannot trust his conclusion anyway. The sceptic’s rebuttal to this however is that we cannot know anything except the fact that we cannot know anything. It is an uncomfortable thought that is difficult to face but we must accept the sceptic’s conclusion. Stroud claimed we only know what we think we know. We may be forced to agree with the sceptic’s conclusion but this does not mean we can never trust our senses. To Moore, the fact that he had two hands was enough evidence for him that they were real. The best we can do in our everyday life is to base our beliefs on the evidence, accept that we can never be certain, but we must live our lives with this fact. Hume argued “A wise man, therefore, proportions his belief to the evidence”.

Philosophical scepticism creates doubt and it is this doubt that forces us to dig deeper, to search further for the truth. Stroud claimed that with this search we gain a better understanding of how our everyday knowledge works. Through doubting knowledge, we gain knowledge in the manner that when we exercise a muscle it destroys part of it but it grows back stronger. In addition it was through the prudence and carefulness in scepticism that led mankind to the scientific method. The significance of philosophical scepticism is progress, but progress usually comes with a cost. At a certain point the sceptic needs to ignore the doubt and simply live.

References

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