BIG QUESTIONS IN PHILOSOPHY: Should I trust my senses?

Peter West
19.03.19
Trinity College Dublin
Overview

1. Scepticism
2. Motivating scepticism about sensory knowledge
3. Radical scepticism
4. Pushing back
   i. Rene Descartes (1596-1650)
   ii. G. E. Moore (1873-1958)
   iii. Hilary Putnam (1926-2016)
What is scepticism?

There is an important distinction between (philosophical) scepticism and incredulity (or mere doubt).

For example;

‘I believe that is a cherry tree’

I can doubt this proposition (or belief), but in a case like this it is possible for the ground of my doubt to be removed.

My ground for doubt (e.g.): ‘I’ve seen cherry trees before, and they don’t look like that.’
What is scepticism?*

This is not a genuine case of philosophical scepticism. Incredulity (or mere doubt) occurs against the backdrop of beliefs about the world which never come into doubt.

‘My picture of the world is about right, and that claim doesn’t fit my picture’

But it’s possible to show that it does (or should) fit that picture (e.g. if I’m shown an encyclopaedia of Irish trees).

In a genuine case of philosophical scepticism, however, you cannot appeal to such beliefs (or a picture of the world) in order to remove the grounds for doubt.

*See Peter Klein, "Skepticism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [online].
Motivating scepticism about the senses

René Descartes (1596-1650)

Meditations on First Philosophy (1641)

Principles of Philosophy (1644)

Which truths can we be certain of?
And which should we doubt?

One truth we can be certain of: ‘Cogito ergo sum’ (I think therefore I am).
Motivating scepticism about the senses

René Descartes (1596-1650)

Meditations on First Philosophy (1641)

Principles of Philosophy (1644)

Which truths can we be certain of?
And which should we doubt?

One truth we can be certain of: ‘Cogito ergo sum’ (I think therefore I am).
Cartesian scepticism

“In order to find out what we can be certain of, we must start by doubting everything which we cannot be entirely certain of. The first type of knowledge we ought to doubt is that gained from our senses.

“there are many preconceived opinions that keep us from knowledge of the truth. It seems that the only way of freeing ourselves from these opinions is to make the effort, once in the course of our life, to doubt everything which we find to contain even the smallest suspicion of uncertainty.” (Principles, 1)
Cartesian scepticism

Why doubt knowledge gained via the senses?

“The first reason for such doubts is that from time to time we have caught out the senses when they were in error, and it is prudent never to place too much trust in those who have deceived us even once. The second reason is that in our sleep we regularly seem to have sensory perception of, or to imagine, countless things which do not exist anywhere; and [...] there seem to be no marks by means of which we can with certainty distinguish being asleep from being awake.” (Principles, 6)
Cartesian scepticism

Why doubt knowledge gained via the senses?

“The first reason for such doubts is that from time to time we have caught out the senses when they were in error, and it is prudent never to place too much trust in those who have deceived us even once. The second reason is that in our sleep we regularly seem to have sensory perception of, or to imagine, countless things which do not exist anywhere; and [...] there seem to be no marks by means of which we can with certainty distinguish being asleep from being awake.” (Principles, 6)
Should I trust my senses?
Cartesian scepticism

Why doubt knowledge gained via the senses?

“The first reason for such doubts is that from time to time we have caught out the senses when they were in error, and it is prudent never to place too much trust in those who have deceived us even once. The second reason is that in our sleep we regularly seem to have sensory perception of, or to imagine, countless things which do not exist anywhere; and […] there seem to be no marks by means of which we can with certainty distinguish being asleep from being awake.” (Principles, 6)

i. We should doubt any source that has deceived us even once.

ii. Our senses have deceived us at least once.

iii. Therefore, we should doubt our senses.

Should I trust my senses?
Cartesian scepticism

Why doubt knowledge gained via the senses?

“The first reason for such doubts is that from time to time we have caught out the senses when they were in error, and it is prudent never to place too much trust in those who have deceived us even once. The second reason is that in our sleep we regularly seem to have sensory perception of, or to imagine, countless things which do not exist anywhere; and [...] there seem to be no marks by means of which we can with certainty distinguish being asleep from being awake.” (Principles, 6)

i. We cannot distinguish being asleep from being awake.

ii. When we are asleep our senses deceive us.

iii. Therefore, we cannot be certain that our senses do not deceive us when we are awake.

Should I trust my senses?
Radical scepticism

Examples like these, in which our senses are shown not to be reliable, open the door for the possibility of what is known as ‘global’ or ‘radical’ scepticism.

To be a radical sceptic (about sensory knowledge) is to assent to the proposition that we should never trust our senses – and thus that we cannot have knowledge of the external world.

[Interesting aside: various conspiracy theories appear to be forms of radical scepticism since they doubt a whole picture of the world; e.g. flat earthers, the illuminati.]

Descartes’ illustrates his understanding of radical scepticism by imagining an evil demon (or genius) with all the power (but none of the benevolence) of God.
Radical scepticism

“I will suppose not a supremely good God, the source of truth, but rather an evil genius, supremely powerful and clever, who has directed his entire effort at deceiving me. I will regard the heavens, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds, and all external things as nothing but the bedevilling hoaxes of my dreams, with which he lays snares for my credulity. I will regard myself as not having hands, or eyes, or flesh, or blood, or any senses, but as nevertheless falsely believing that I possess all these things.” (First Meditation)
Radical scepticism (in the 90s)*

The Matrix (1999)
“depicts a dystopian future in which humanity is unknowingly trapped inside a simulated reality called the Matrix [...] The Matrix is a shared simulation of the world as it was at the end of the 20th century, where the harvested humans' minds are pacified while their bodies are contained in pods.” (Wikipedia)

If you were an individual living a simulated life inside the Matrix you would be right to be a radical sceptic (though you would never know it...unless you took the red pill).

Against radical scepticism

Three ways of pushing back against radical scepticism:
(1) God.
(2) Common sense.
(3) Reason.
Descartes’ anti-scepticism

Despite being famous for putting forward radical (or ‘Cartesian’) scepticism, ultimately Descartes argues that we *can* (for the most part) trust our senses.

Why? Simple answer: God is benevolent.

“But now, having begun to have a better knowledge of myself and the author of my origin, I am of the opinion that I must not rashly admit everything that I seem to derive from the senses; but neither, for that matter, should I call everything into doubt.” (*Sixth Meditation*)
Descartes *anti*-scepticism

“[God] has given me a great inclination to believe that these ideas issue from corporeal things, I fail to see how God could be understood not to be a deceiver, if these ideas were to issue from a source other than corporeal things. And consequently corporeal things exist.” (*Sixth Meditation*)

‘Ideas’ – sensations.

No doubt we have sensations (sensory experiences), the (sceptical) question we’re interested in is whether they accurately tell us about the external world.

Descartes: it is human nature to trust our senses, and human nature is God-given.
Descartes anti-scepticism

“[God] has given me a great inclination to believe that these ideas issue from corporeal things, I fail to see how God could be understood not to be a deceiver, if these ideas were to issue from a source other than corporeal things. And consequently corporeal things exist.” (Sixth Meditation)

i. Human nature is God-given.

ii. Human nature compels us to trust our senses.

iii. Therefore, if our senses are untrustworthy then God has deceived us.

iv. God is not a deceiver.

v. Therefore, our senses must be trustworthy.

Should I trust my senses?
G. E. Moore’s ‘Proof of an External World’ (1939)*

I suggested that Moore’s answer to radical scepticism is a common sense answer – that is probably contestable (and perhaps depends on how you understand ‘common sense’).

But it is clear that Moore thinks proving the existence of the external world (the world we experience via our senses) is a lot easier than philosophers have tended to make out.

Moore sets out to prove the existence of ‘things to be met with outside of us’; i.e. what we might call ‘physical objects’ or ‘material things’. Our senses tell us that such things exist, hence if Moore is right then we have a good reason to trust our senses.

“there seems to me no doubt whatever that it is a matter of some importance and also a matter which falls properly within the province of philosophy, to discuss the question what sort of proof, if any, can be given of ‘the existence of things outside us’. And to discuss this question was my object when I began to write the present lecture.” (1993, 148)
Moore’s argument

More points out that all it takes to prove that the general claim ‘external things exist’ is true is to show that one or more particular external things exist.

“if you have proved that two plants exist, or that a plant and a dog exist, or that a dog and a shadow exist, etc., etc., you will ipso facto have proved that there are things to be met with in space: you will not require also to give a separate proof that from the proposition that there are plants it also follows that there are things to be met with in space.” (1993, 158)
Moore’s argument

More points out that all it takes to prove that the general claim ‘external things exist’ is true is to show that one or more particular external things exist.

“if you have proved that two plants exist, or that a plant and a dog exist, or that a dog and a shadow exist, etc., etc., you will ipso facto have proved that there are things to be met with in space: you will not require also to give a separate proof that from the proposition that there are plants it also follows that there are things to be met with in space.”

(1993, 158)
Moore’s argument

Moore is setting up a premise in his argument, which will do most of the heavy lifting.

*If I know one (or more) thing(s) of a kind exist, then I know that ‘things of that kind exist’.*

*If I know one (or more) external things exist, then I know that ‘external things exist’.*

Having established this premise, he explains:

“I can now give a large number of different proofs, each of which is a perfectly rigorous proof [...] I can prove now, for instance, that two human hands exist.” (1993, 166)
Moore’s ‘two hands’

“How? By holding up my two hands, and saying, as I make a certain gesture with the right hand, ‘Here is one hand’…”

“…and adding, as I make a certain gesture with the left, ‘and here is another’.” (1993, 166)
Common sense?

(i) If I know that one (or more) thing(s) of a kind exist, then I know that ‘things of that kind exist’.
(ii) I know that two hands exist.
(iii) Therefore, I know that external things exist.
Common sense?

(i) If I know that one (or more) thing(s) of a kind exist, then I know that ‘things of that kind exist’.

(ii) I know that two hands exist.

(iii) Therefore, I know that external things exist.

“I certainly did at the moment know that which I expressed by a combination of certain gestures with saying the words ‘There is one hand and here is another’ […] How absurd it would be to suggest that I did not know it, but only believed it, and that perhaps it was not the case! You might as well suggest that I do not now know that I am standing up and talking – that perhaps after all I’m not, and that it’s not quite certain that I am!” (1993, 167)
Is Moore assuming some premises that automatically rule out radical scepticism?

i.e. I know my two hands, which are external objects, exist.

Sounds a little like Samuel Johnson (responding, in 1763, to what he took to be a form of scepticism):

“I observed, that though we are satisfied [Berkeley’s] doctrine is not true, it is impossible to refute it. I never shall forget the alacrity with which Johnson answered, striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it, ‘I refute it THUS.’”

(James Boswell, Life of Samuel Johnson, 1791)
Brains in vats

The ‘brain in a vat’ thought experiment is widely used in discussions of knowledge, certainty, scepticism. It is an updated version of Descartes’ radical scepticism (and very similar to The Matrix).

The idea is that you are actually a brain hooked up to a computer programme that simulates real life.

All your experiences are actually the result of simulated sensory inputs.
Hilary Putnam* vs. brains in vats

“I am going to argue that the supposition that we are actually brains in a vat, although it violates no physical law, and is perfectly consistent with everything we have experienced, cannot possibly be true. *It cannot possibly be true*, because it is, in a certain way, self-refuting.” (1981, 7)

Self-refuting: implies its own falsity.
Putnam provides what he takes to be a conclusive argument against the possibility that we are really brains in vats.
He thus concludes that this kind of radical scepticism ought to be rejected.

Putnam’s argument

Roughly, Putnam’s argument looks something like this:

(i) In a world where everyone is actually a brain in a vat, it is never possible to truthfully say ‘we are brains in a vat’.

(ii) So, if we are really brains in a vat then ‘we are brains in a vat’ is false.

(iii) So, ‘we are brains in a vat’ is necessarily false.

Either because we are not really brains in a vat.

Or because we are, which [from (i)] makes the sentence false.

(iv) If ‘we are brains in a vat’ is false, then we are not brains in a vat.

Should I trust my senses?
Putnam’s argument

Roughly, Putnam’s argument looks something like this:

(i) In a world where everyone is actually a brain in a vat, it is never possible to truthfully say ‘we are brains in a vat’.

(ii) So, if we are really brains in a vat then ‘we are brains in a vat’ is false.

(iii) So, ‘we are brains in a vat’ is necessarily false. *Either because we are not really brains in a vat.*

*Or because we are, which [from (i)] makes the sentence false.*

(iv) If ‘we are brains in a vat’ is false, then we are not brains in a vat.
Reference

In a world where everyone is actually a brain in a vat, it is never possible to truthfully say ‘we are brains in a vat’.

Why?
Because brain-in-vat folk can never refer to real ‘brains’ or real ‘vats’ (or real anything else for that matter).

Why?
Because what they refer to by ‘brain’, ‘vat’, ‘tree’, ‘dog’ [etc] are actually simulated inputs from a super-computer.
Should I trust my senses?
Reference

In a world where everyone is actually a brain in a vat, it is never possibly to truthfully say ‘we are brains in a vat’.

Why?
Because brain-in-vat folk can never refer to real ‘brains’ or real ‘vats’ (or real anything else for that matter).

Why?
Because what they refer to by ‘brain’, ‘vat’, ‘tree’, ‘dog’ [etc] are actually simulated inputs from a super-computer.
So ‘we are brains in vats’ is not true in the sense of actually meaning that they are (real) brains in (real) vats.
Putnam’s conclusion

“if we are brains in a vat, then the sentence ‘We are brains in a vat’ says something false (if it says anything). In short, if we are brains in a vat, then ‘We are brains in a vat’ is false. So it is (necessarily) false.” (1981, 15)

‘We are brains in a vat’ is false in everything conceivable circumstance; i.e. necessarily.
Can we be certain that the world we experience via our senses really exists?

The nature of God precludes the possibility of our senses deceiving us.

*Relies on Descartes’ arguments for the existence of God.*

It would be absurd to doubt that I know I have two hands which, in turn, is enough to establish that external things exist.

*Doesn’t radical scepticism mean doubting the existence of even one’s own hands?*
Radical scepticism

“I will suppose not a supremely good God, the source of truth, but rather an evil genius, supremely powerful and clever, who has directed his entire effort at deceiving me. I will regard the heavens, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds, and all external things as nothing but the bedevilling hoaxes of my dreams, with which he lays snares for my credulity. I will regard myself as not having hands, or eyes, or flesh, or blood, or any senses, but as nevertheless falsely believing that I possess all these things.” (First Meditation)
Can we be *certain* that the world we experience via our senses really exists?

The nature of God precludes the possibility of our senses deceiving us.

*Relies on Descartes’ arguments for the existence of God.*

It would be absurd to doubt that I know I have two hands which, in turn, is enough to establish that external things exist.

*Doesn’t radical scepticism mean doubting the existence of even one’s own hands?*

‘We are brains in vats’ is self-refuting.

*Is the falsity of ‘we are brains in a vat’ the same as the our not actually being brains in vats?*  
*i.e. if we can’t truthfully say ‘we are brains in vats’ it is impossible that we *are* brains in vats?*

Should I trust my senses?
Thanks!

If you have any questions or need further assistance, please feel free to reach out to westp@tcd.ie.

The image contains a comic strip featuring a conversation about the frequency of meetings and the challenges they pose. The character Descartes asks if some evil demon, no less powerful than deceitful, had only placed the schedule before his eyes in order to trick him into believing.

The comic highlights the frustration of having multiple meetings and the confusion about which ones actually count.

Contact: westp@tcd.ie
Should I trust my senses?
Philosophical scepticism

Traditionally, in philosophy, there are two brands of scepticism.

*Academic Scepticism*
(Plato’s academy, ca. 3rd – 1st Century BCE)
Assert that we cannot have knowledge of propositions concerning a particular issue.
Accused of being ‘dogmatic’.

*Pyrrhonian Scepticism*
(Pyrrho of Elis, ca. 365-275 BCE)
Neither asserts that knowledge of a particular issue is possible nor asserts that it is impossible.
‘On the fence’ (as a matter of principle).
Philosophical scepticism

Traditionally, in philosophy, there are two brands of scepticism.

*Academic Scepticism*
(Plato’s academy, ca. 3rd – 1st Century BCE)
Assert that we cannot have knowledge of propositions concerning a particular issue.
Accused of being ‘dogmatic’.

*Pyrrhonian Scepticism*
(Pyrrho of Elis, ca. 365–275 BCE)
Neither asserts that knowledge of a particular issue is possible nor asserts that it is impossible.
‘On the fence’ (as a matter of principle).