

Types of scepticism

Antecedent (to doing philosophy)

Consequent (as a result of doing philosophy)

Types of antecedent scepticism

Extreme

(doubt everything you know and distrust your cognitive powers until you have established something firm; then build on that)

Moderate

(doubt everything you have been taught; reduce complexes to simples; begin with clear and evident principles; proceed by slow, cautious steps)

Extreme antecedent scepticism is impossible

There is no absolutely certain first principle, and even if there were it would be impossible to build anything on it if we distrust all our cognitive powers

Moderate antecedent scepticism is harmless

It is merely the scientific method

The scepticism that poses a problem is consequent scepticism.

Arguments for consequent scepticism about the evidence of the senses

The “trite topics”

appeal to the experience that the same object appears differently in order to prove that we must distrust what our senses tell us

these arguments are inadequate because there are means of correcting and improving the senses

- checking them against one another
- discriminating between circumstances where they are always reliable and those where they are liable to deceive us
- identifying how they mislead us in particular circumstances and then correcting for the error when in those circumstances

The “more profound arguments”

appeal to the experience that the same object appears differently in order to prove that what we experience is not the very external object but an “image or perception”

then ask how we know that there are external objects or that they are anything like the images we perceive

Example:

A table appears to diminish as we remove further from it

A better, more contemporary case is provided by the appearance of highway signs as they are approached

As you approach the sign appears to become larger. It gains minimally visible parts. It becomes more legible.

But we don't think the actual object is growing or gaining parts.

We think the change is due to us.

But if what we see changes due to changes occurring in us, the thing we see must be something that exists only in us

an image or representation

We are compelled to believe in the existence of an external world by a “natural instinct or prepossession”

but this instinct compels us to consider the images or perceptions that exist in us to be the external objects

the “slightest bit of reasoning” proves this to be false

Nor do we have any way of reasoning to the existence of an external world

Whatever exists can not exist, so there is no contradiction in denying the existence of anything.

So there cannot be any demonstrative arguments (by appeal to relations of ideas) to prove the existence of an external world

So we must rely on experience.

But sensation and memory only tell us about images and perceptions, not about external objects

So the only way we could arrive at belief in external existence is by causal inference.

But causal inference is only possible when you have experienced a constant conjunction between the cause and the effect in the past.

And in this case, the requisite experience is impossible

Since we only ever experience images and perceptions, not the objects that cause them, we are in no position to infer the existence of objects from that of images or perceptions.

Moreover, we have experience (in dreams) that the effect can arise from other causes, and so does not need external objects as its cause.

A further argument

All are agreed that the sensible qualities are “merely secondary” and do not exist in the external world.

But the primary qualities cannot exist apart from the secondary.

Solidity requires extension

(since the concept of solidity is resistance of a body to entry of another body into the space it occupies)

Extension requires shape

Shape requires edges

Edges require contrasting sensible qualities

But once it is admitted that neither the primary nor the secondary qualities belong to external objects, there is nothing left for external objects to be (that we can conceive of).

Arguments for consequent scepticism about demonstrative and probable reasoning

Against demonstrative reasoning:

Demonstrative reasoning is chiefly involved with space and time.

But these concepts contain inescapable contradictions involving infinite divisibility.

Against probable reasoning

There are “popular objections” against probable reasoning that attempt to show that it is unreliable

different people draw different conclusions from the same evidence, and the same person does so at different times

These arguments are unconvincing because we cannot avoid engaging in probable reasoning if we are to get by in life. Even if it is not perfectly reliable, we have no choice but to make do with it

There are “philosophical objections” against probable reasoning that are more serious.

They show (cf. EHU4) that all probable reasoning is based on causal inference, but that there is no rational justification for causal inference

Only instinct (the fact that we are creatures of habit) leads us to draw inferences from experience, and that instinct may be deceitful.

As powerful as the “more profound arguments” against the senses and the “philosophical objections” to probable reasoning may be, we are not and cannot be persuaded by them.

So what is the point?

People who have been exposed to these arguments are made more cautious and modest in their opinions as a consequence of this experience.

They are also more disposed to tolerate the contrary opinions of others.

The arguments also make them suspicious enough about the reliability of their powers of knowledge to be able to resist all but the *strongest* natural impulses.

They are able to resist “trivial suggestions of the fancy” that others are taken in by.

Natural impulse is strongest in the case of statistically guided causal inference, because of the multiple resemblance and contiguity relations involved.

But there are lesser degrees of belief produced in us by other, less reliable operations

(e.g., the tendency to want to believe something because it is pleasing or arouses other strong passions)

People who have been exposed to sceptical arguments are better able to resist those beliefs.

So an exposure to sceptical arguments makes you more rational

— something reasoning from general rules is unable to do on its own.