

How Do We Know Anything?

If you think about it, the inside of your own mind is the only thing you can be sure of.

Whatever you believe—whether it's about the sun, moon, and stars, the house and neighborhood in which you live, history, science, other people, even the existence of your own body—is based on your experiences and thoughts, feelings and sense impressions. That's all you have to go on directly, whether you see the book in your hands, or feel the floor under your feet, or remember that George Washington was the first president of the United States, or that water is H₂O. Everything else is farther away from you than your inner experiences and thoughts, and reaches you only through them.

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Ordinarily you have no doubts about the existence of the floor under your feet, or the tree outside the window, or your own teeth. In fact most of the time you don't even think about the mental states that make you aware of those things: you seem to be aware of them directly. But how do you know they really exist? Would things seem any different to you if in fact all these things existed *only* in your mind—if everything you took to be the real world outside was just a giant dream or hallucination, from which you will never wake up?

If it were like that, then of course you *couldn't* wake up, as you can from a dream, because it would mean there was no "real" world to wake up into. So it wouldn't be exactly like a normal dream or hallucination. As we usually think of dreams, they go on in the minds of people who are actually lying in a real bed in a real house, even if in the dream they are running away from a homicidal lawnmower through the streets of Kansas City. We also assume that normal dreams depend on what is happening in the dreamer's brain while he sleeps.

But couldn't all your experiences be like a giant dream with *no* external world outside it? How can you know that isn't what's going on? If all your experience were a dream with *nothing* outside, then any evidence you tried to use to

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prove to yourself that there was an outside world would just be part of the dream. If you knocked on the table or pinched yourself, you would hear the knock and feel the pinch, but that would be just one more thing going on inside your mind like everything else. It's no use: If you want to find out whether what's inside your mind is any guide to what's outside your mind, you can't depend on how things *seem*—from inside your mind—to give you the answer.

But what else is there to depend on? All your evidence about anything has to come through your mind—whether in the form of perception, the testimony of books and other people, or memory—and it is entirely consistent with everything you're aware of that *nothing at all* exists except the inside of your mind.

It's even possible that you don't have a body or a brain—since your beliefs about that come only through the evidence of your senses. You've never seen your brain—you just assume that everybody has one—but even if you had seen it, or thought you had, that would have been just another visual experience. Maybe *you*, the subject of experience, are the only thing that exists, and there is no physical world at all—no stars, no earth, no human bodies. Maybe there isn't even any space.

If you try to argue that there must be an external physical world, because you wouldn't see

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buildings, people, or stars unless there were things out there that reflected or shed light into your eyes and caused your visual experiences, the reply is obvious: How do you know *that*? It's just another claim about the external world and your relation to it, and it has to be based on the evidence of your senses. *But you can rely on that specific evidence about how visual experiences are caused only if you can already rely in general on the contents of your mind to tell you about the external world. And that is exactly what has been called into question.* If you try to prove the reliability of your impressions by appealing to your impressions, you're arguing in a circle and won't get anywhere.

The most radical conclusion to draw from this would be that your mind *is* the only thing that exists. This view is called solipsism. It is a very lonely view, and not too many people have held it. As you can tell from that remark, I don't hold it myself. If I were a solipsist I probably wouldn't be writing this book, since I wouldn't believe there was anybody else to read it. On the other hand, perhaps I would write it to make my inner life more interesting, by including the impression of the appearance of the book in print, of other people reading it and telling me their reactions, and so forth. I might even get the impression of royalties, if I'm lucky.

Perhaps you are a solipsist: in that case you

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will regard this book as a product of your own mind, coming into existence in your experience as you read it. Obviously nothing I can say can prove to you that I really exist, or that the book as a physical object exists.

On the other hand, to conclude that you are the only thing that exists is more than the evidence warrants. You can't *know* on the basis of what's in your mind that there's no world outside it. Perhaps the right conclusion is the more modest one that you don't know anything beyond your impressions and experiences. There may or may not be an external world, and if there is it may or may not be completely different from how it seems to you—there's no way for you to tell. This view is called skepticism about the external world.

An even stronger form of skepticism is possible. Similar arguments seem to show that you don't know anything even about your own past existence and experiences, since all you have to go on are the present contents of your mind, including memory impressions. If you can't be sure that the world outside your mind exists *now*, how can you be sure that you yourself existed *before* now? How do you know you didn't just come into existence a few minutes ago, complete with all your present memories? The only evidence that you couldn't have come into exist-

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tence a few minutes ago depends on beliefs about how people and their memories are produced, which rely in turn on beliefs about what has happened in the past. But to rely on those beliefs to prove that you existed in the past would again be to argue in a circle. You would be assuming the reality of the past to prove the reality of the past.

It seems that you are stuck with nothing you can be sure of except the contents of your own mind at the present moment. And it seems that anything you try to do to argue your way out of this predicament will fail, because the argument will have to assume what you are trying to prove—the existence of the external world beyond your mind.

Suppose, for instance, you argue that there must be an external world, because it is incredible that you should be having all these experiences without there being *some* explanation in terms of external causes. The skeptic can make two replies. First, even if there are external causes, how can you tell from the contents of your experience what those causes are like? You've never observed any of them directly. Second, what is the basis of your idea that everything has to have an explanation? It's true that in your normal, nonphilosophical conception of the world, processes like those which go on in

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your mind are caused, at least in part, by other things outside them. But you can't assume that this is true if what you're trying to figure out is how you know *anything* about the world outside your mind. And there is no way to prove such a principle just by looking at what's *inside* your mind. However plausible the principle may seem to you, what reason do you have to believe that it applies to the world?

Science won't help us with this problem either, though it might seem to. In ordinary scientific thinking, we rely on general principles of explanation to pass from the way the world first seems to us to a different conception of what it is really like. We try to explain the appearances in terms of a theory that describes the reality behind them, a reality that we can't observe directly. That is how physics and chemistry conclude that all the things we see around us are composed of invisibly small atoms. Could we argue that the general belief in the external world has the same kind of scientific backing as the belief in atoms?

The skeptic's answer is that the process of scientific reasoning raises the same skeptical problem we have been considering all along: Science is just as vulnerable as perception. How can we know that the world outside our minds corresponds to our ideas of what would be a good

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theoretical explanation of our observations? If we can't establish the reliability of our sense experiences in relation to the external world, there's no reason to think we can rely on our scientific theories either.

There is another very different response to the problem. Some would argue that radical skepticism of the kind I have been talking about is meaningless, because the idea of an external reality that *no one* could ever discover is meaningless. The argument is that a dream, for instance, has to be something from which you *can* wake up to discover that you have been asleep; a hallucination has to be something which others (or you later) *can* see is not really there. Impressions and appearances that do not correspond to reality must be contrasted with others that *do* correspond to reality, or else the contrast between appearance and reality is meaningless.

According to this view, the idea of a dream from which you can never wake up is not the idea of a dream at all: it is the idea of *reality*—the real world in which you live. Our idea of the things that exist is just our idea of what we can observe. (This view is sometimes called verificationism.) Sometimes our observations are mistaken, but that means they can be corrected by other observations—as when you wake up from a dream or discover that what you thought was

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a snake was just a shadow on the grass. But without some possibility of a correct view of how things are (either yours or someone else's), the thought that your impressions of the world are not true is meaningless.

If this is right, then the skeptic is kidding himself if he thinks he can imagine that the only thing that exists is his own mind. He is kidding himself, because it couldn't be true that the physical world doesn't really exist, unless somebody could *observe* that it doesn't exist. And what the skeptic is trying to imagine is precisely that there is no one to observe that or anything else—except of course the skeptic himself, and all he can observe is the inside of his own mind. So solipsism is meaningless. It tries to subtract the external world from the totality of my impressions; but it fails, because if the external world is subtracted, they stop being mere impressions, and become instead perceptions of reality.

Is this argument against solipsism and skepticism any good? Not unless reality can be defined as what we can observe. But are we really unable to understand the idea of a real world, or a fact about reality, that can't be observed by anyone, human or otherwise?

The skeptic will claim that if there is an external world, the things in it are observable because

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they exist, and not the other way around: that existence isn't the same thing as observability. And although we get the idea of dreams and hallucinations from cases where we think we *can* observe the contrast between our experiences and reality, it certainly seems as if the same idea can be extended to cases where the reality is not observable.

If that is right, it seems to follow that it is not meaningless to think that the world might consist of nothing but the inside of your mind, though neither you nor anyone else could find out that this was true. And if this is not meaningless, but is a possibility you must consider, there seems no way to prove that it is false, without arguing in a circle. So there may be no way out of the cage of your own mind. This is sometimes called the egocentric predicament.

And yet, after all this has been said, I have to admit it is practically impossible to believe seriously that all the things in the world around you might not really exist. Our acceptance of the external world is instinctive and powerful: we cannot just get rid of it by philosophical arguments. Not only do we go on acting *as if* other people and things exist: we *believe* that they do, even after we've gone through the arguments which appear to show we have no grounds for this belief. (We may have grounds, within the overall

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system of our beliefs about the world, for more particular beliefs about the existence of particular things: like a mouse in the breadbox, for example. But that is different. It assumes the existence of the external world.)

If a belief in the world outside our minds comes so naturally to us, perhaps we don't need grounds for it. We can just let it be and hope that we're right. And that in fact is what most people do after giving up the attempt to prove it: even if they can't give reasons against skepticism, they can't live with it either. But this means that we hold on to most of our ordinary beliefs about the world in face of the fact that (a) they might be completely false, and (b) we have no basis for ruling out that possibility.

We are left then with three questions:

1. Is it a meaningful possibility that the inside of your mind is the only thing that exists—or that even if there is a world outside your mind, it is totally unlike what you believe it to be?
2. If these things are possible, do you have any way of proving to yourself that they are not actually true?
3. If you can't prove that anything exists outside your own mind, is it all right to go on believing in the external world anyway?

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Other Minds

There is one special kind of skepticism which continues to be a problem even if you assume that your mind is not the only thing there is—that the physical world you seem to see and feel around you, including your own body, really exists. That is skepticism about the nature or even existence of minds or experiences other than your own.

How much do you really know about what goes on in anyone else's mind? Clearly you observe only the bodies of other creatures, including people. You watch what they do, listen to what they say and to the other sounds they make, and see how they respond to their environment—what things attract them and what things repel them, what they eat, and so forth. You can also cut open other creatures and look

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