

CT Research Paper

Skepticism

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Abstract

What do you know for sure? Consider that you are reading this article right now. You might suggest that you 'know' that you are reading it, but are you though? How can you be so sure that it is not a dream, that you are not sleeping and you are reading an article? The idea that we can be sure of nothing and cannot possibly know what is true is called the Idea of Skepticism. The idea of doubt is what brought about this discussion about skepticism. Skepticism is derived from a Greek word 'skeptikos' which means 'an inquirer'. There are two schools of skepticism, first, the Academic skepticism. We know that visual and sensory touches or responses are a major contributor towards knowledge, but what if you say that what we see and feel are false and there is no way to prove it. Thus the main belief of the Academic Skepticism is that 'Knowledge is Impossible', that we cannot have the true knowledge of anything. For example, let me ask you how do you know that I am the same person who started writing this research paper? It is through your conclusions and deductions that you assume that it is the same person, but you cannot be sure and hence this explains the academic skepticism. The other school of belief is the Pyrrhonian Skepticism. It was derived from the Pyrrho of Elis, who is considered the founder of ancient skepticism. The goal of these skeptics was to keep on enquiring about everything and ask questions about almost everything, these skeptics took academic skepticism to a next level by even questioning their belief that 'Is knowledge possible? Who knows?'.

There are many arguments in skepticism, the easiest one to imagine is the dreaming argument. The dreaming argument is a much more elaborate question of the one asked in the beginning of the article. What if all that you are seeing is a dream and nothing more? What if you are reading this article in your dream, how would you prove that you are awake and not sleeping, or maybe you could say that you are awake but the article you are reading is imaginary and you are dreaming it, how can you be so sure that you are awake and the article you are reading is also real? This is known as the Dreaming Argument. The ancient Chinese philosopher, Chuang Tzu once went to sleep and dreamt that he was a butterfly. The dream felt so real, that he began to question his existence, he thought he was actually a butterfly who was dreaming that he was a human and not that he was a man dreaming that he is a butterfly. Thus we cannot be so sure that we exist in this world. It all may be a dream inside of something you may not even know. For me personally, even I have had this doubt for months. Sometimes I dream of a conversation and it feels so real, that I start believing that the conversation actually happened and the people involved all know about it but actually nothing of this sort happens. The vice versa is also true, sometimes I feel as though I have never had a conversation with a person but actually it has happened and causes me to doubt my existence and question that is our knowledge even real?

Now, one might argue that there are some things that one can be sure of even while he is dreaming. For example, even if you are sleeping then you would know $2+3=5$ or that a square has 4 sides. But, 17th-century philosopher, Rene Descartes created a system of doubt and a method to question even these beliefs. He argued that it feels right for you to assume some things and these simple mathematical problems but you really need to ask yourself that whether

what feels right to us really has to be true. Descartes wrote a book called *Meditations*. In this book he gave a hypothesis of an Evil Demon. This hypothesis gave him reason to doubt the existence of everything he believes and perceives. He describes the demon as cunning and vicious with utmost power, that has the sole purpose of defeating Descartes. He says that the evil demon has created the perfect illusion and portrays the outer world as we see it and we assume that everything is real but actually it is all inside an illusion created by the evil demon. That evil genius also changes all that you believe and you think, he gives you information about math, science, geometry, etc and making false things seem true to you and thus deceiving you. So, Descartes argued that the challenge of skepticism is the challenge of proving that you are not, right now, in the hands of such a demon. One might argue that the answer to this question is that, even if an evil demon controls me, but I am thinking about it that means that I am my own person and hence I exist. That is, I think, Therefore I exist. But one cannot so easily dismiss it, you think, but so what? Maybe the evil genius wants you to believe that you are thinking. Descartes also argued that we have one more thing at our disposal, so many ideas in your brain. You have an idea of a dog, a house, a body, etc but the thing that Descartes knew was the idea of a perfect being and he felt that, it was such an amazing idea that it could not have been put in his brain and that it could not have been created by an imperfect being and hence as he has this idea it must have come from a perfect being and hence the perfect being is God and therefore God exists. And if the universe is run by a good and all-powerful God then we cannot be trapped in an endless dream of unreality. Therefore, Descartes argues, it is not possible to be in a global skeptical scenario, and hence evil demon cannot possibly exist in a world of God. But skeptics say that maybe, the basis of your assumption is wrong, you say that imperfect beings cannot have perfect ideas but what if the Evil Demon wants you to think that and that it is an illusion for you.

Bertrand Russell was another philosopher. He argued, unlike Descartes, that we can never have an airtight logical proof that we are not being deceived, it is logically possible that we are living in a dream. He also said that we have no good reasons to accept these skeptical hypothesis but at least two good reasons to accept the common sense approach. First, that it is simple and systematic to accept the common sense approach. Second, common sense is our starting point and in our instinctive beliefs. He says that we should have slight doubt about these common sense approach but these approach are still strong enough to be considered as knowledge. That yes, these skeptic scenarios are possible but that doesn't mean that you desert science and start believing in it.

Another approach to skepticism was given by G. E. Moore. He says that you don't need to God to prove that there is an outer world, or you don't need to infer something or think about complicated things to know for sure if the outer world exists. He says 'Just look at your hands!'. He says you can see one hand, then you can see another hand, as you can see your hands and your hands are external objects, hence External objects are real. Moore says if a skeptic says that maybe there is no hand all along then we should dismiss him and his demand for proof.

Reflections and Views

My views about this topic are much varying. I am all for skepticism and the basic ideology of it, but I am uncertain about some aspects of the argument of skepticism. I like the idea that we should consistently consider our idea of existence as it may not be as simple as we think. It is not as such that we just exist and that is that, but much deeper than we can normally imagine and hence questioning it brings about such radical thinking processes in all of us. I believe that Skepticism is correctly and aptly derived from the Greek word for 'inquirer' because a skeptic always inquires about the nature of anything that is presented before him and he is not burdened by the notion of believing everything that is served before him. A skeptic would think differently than an average person because of his nature to not believe anything. This could be like the 'Po Thinking' philosophy that was discussed in class. According to some sources, skepticism began to appear in the 5th-century BCE, this shows that humans have been questioning human existence since a really long time and we still haven't reached a proper answer and we aren't even close to figuring out what it is. From Socrates and Plato to Descartes and now to modern philosophers like Russell and Moore, all of them have tried to explain skepticism and end it once and for all but in my opinion, all they created was more skepticism about their ideas and number of philosophers have emerged and tried to explain this 'existential crisis'. Now comes the notion of Academic and Pyrrhonian Skepticism, while academic skeptics say that knowledge is impossible but Pyrrhonian skeptics argue that that is also questionable, that we should phrase it Is knowledge possible? As of me, I am more inclined towards the Pyrrhonian argument because we are never certain of anything and hence cannot say that something is impossible. If knowledge is impossible then that means that you have knowledge of the fact that knowledge is not possible, but hence here you are proven wrong because your statement says that you cannot have any knowledge and hence that it is true that nobody really knows if knowledge is possible or not.

Now comes the notion of the dreaming argument, this argument is also referenced in Meditations written by Rene Descartes. I am not a huge believer in this argument. This argument does not seem of much sense to me. Descartes argues that we may not be in a reality but we may be inside a dream of someone or something else, as a figment of their imagination, but I believe that no matter how real a dream may be, it is just a dream. Not always does a dream be so true that you can't distinguish it from real life. We all have dreams but we always somehow know that it is a dream so if we were actually in a dream then we would actually have a sense of knowledge about the dream. Also, if you see in real life we actually have such clear details about everything and we can see precise outlines and other things which tell us that we are actually in a reality and not in a dream. In dreams, the outline blurs and we do not have much of the details that we could perceive, and hence the conclusion that we may not be in a dream. Another argument is that sometimes when we wake up and then again go to sleep we cannot have the same dream continuing and there is some variation, so this means that the person dreaming us is always sleeping and never wakes up. Also, dreams we have are almost never very hyper-realistic, the dreams are either too over fancy or too less dramatized, and hence when I see real life I think that life is not a dream because it is such real

and we may never have over fancy things happening to us. Like we wouldn't go chasing a guy for no reason, or develop super strength for a course of one fight, it is all in a dream and as it never happens in real life, I conclude that we are not in a dream but this is the reality. Another counter-argument to my statement could be that, what if we are in a dream and what if the reality is the dream that is so perfect that we see everything in great detail and hence the dreams we have in this dream are distorted because the person having the dreams is not capable of having perfect dreams inside of perfect dreams. To this, I have no answer but to say that this statement is based on a lot of assumptions and hence is a little fragile to be true but it could be possible.

For the Descartes argument about the evil demon. I somehow believe in that notion and hence I would say that I agree with Descartes on this experiment that he gave. If there is an evil genius and he controls everything that we think and feels, then it is almost impossible to prove it wrong and say that it is not true. Critics say that his argument of the God can be said as the disapproving of the demon theory but I would say that even if a demon exists who put ideas in your brain maybe, the idea of a perfect being is also wrong. If your idea of a perfect being has been put in your head by a demon then that can also mean that your idea of a perfect being is wrong and maybe there doesn't exist a perfect being. I think the beauty of this statement is that this statement cannot be proven wrong by any means, you cannot think of an example of real life that differs from this theory of an evil demon. A similar experiment to this is the Brain in a Vat experiment, which shows that it could be a supercomputer controlling your brain all along and you just feel things because of this supercomputer. This idea was also dramatized in the movie, The Matrix. The whole meaning of the film was to generate thinking about the Brain in a Vat experiment. In the movie, Keanu Reeves goes through a brain stimulus to find a person inside a computer and then that person tells him that all the ordinary life was because of a race of computers who utilize the brain of people and make them feel as if it is all normal. The computer stimulates the brain into deceiving and thinking that the brain is inside a human body which is leading a life which is ordinary and very much human. This is exactly what the thought experiment is in Brain in a Vat, to put the brain in a computer and then stimulate it to feel things and take inputs from it, and make it feel like it is a living breathing organism. Hence, it causes fear to think this way and to think that we all are controlled by some computers. But we can say this is a little more free than the Evil Demon theory because at least in this theory we say that the brain actually thinks of something and our thoughts are our own but in evil demon theory we have no control over our brain and the brain is fed thoughts by the demon.

Russell's theory that we should approve of the common sense theory is much more logical because it is better than the skeptical way as it is much simpler and less complicated, and also touch and feel real things which are the basic proof you can give to anything. Moore's theory is even simpler and it is the easiest to understand, but I think it is just an escape to talk about these topics by just dismissing them as critics and not answering their questions. In my opinion, it would not be logical for us to leave these basic questions unanswered and hence I do not support Moore's theory.

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