Beliefs and Skepticism

Prof. Lewin at MIT in a Physics class

www.youtube.com/watch?v=xXXF2C-vrQE

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Some Definitions

Belief is
a proposition
that we hold true

Skepticism is
the attitude of
doubting <u>some</u>
or <u>all</u> our beliefs

Examples:
-Lehman is in the Bronx
-Obama is American
-We are alive
-God exists
(or God does not exist)
-Etc.

Beliefs and Skepticism

How do we justify our beliefs? How can we tell truth from falsehood?

Can we doubt all our beliefs? Can everything we believe be false?

How Do We Justify Our Beliefs?

Sensory experience

Reasoning

On a Island with a Madman

EXISTENTIAL COMICS
A DIALOG WITH A MADMAN.
TELL ME SANUS, WHAT IS THE PRIMACY OF KNOWLEDGE? WHAT IS THE SOURCE OF ALL SOURCES UPON WHICH TRUTH IS BUILT?
OUR EXPERIENCE OF THE WORLD, SURELY.
NO NO! THAT SIMPLY CANNOT BE, FOR SUCH EXPERIENCE CANNOT EVEN FOUND ITSELF, MUCH LESS ALL THAT IS KNOWN!
EXPERIENCE IS THE MOST UNTRUSTWOTHY OF ALL KNOWLEDGE. I AM A MADMAN AS YOU KNOW, SO I CANNOT TRUST WHAT I SEE TO BE TRUE IN THE LEAST, LEST I ALSO BE A FOOL.

HOW CAN EXPERIENCE FOUND TRUTH WHEN IT CANNOT ITSELF BE KNOWN AS TRUE? YOU THINK YOURSELF QUITE SANE, BUT WHAT YOU SEE CANNOT BE TRUSTED ANY MORE THAN MY MAD VISIONS.
LONG HAVE WE LINGERED ON THIS ISLAND, PERHAPS YOU ARE AS MAD AS I, ONLY YOUR HUBRIS KEEPS YOU FROM KNOWING IT!
I ASSURE YOU, AMENTIA, I AM QUITE SANE. WHEN I LOOK AT THE WORLD, I SEE IT CLEARLY; OF COURSE I CAN'T SEE REALITY DIRECTLY, BUT I CAN STILL MAKE INFERENCES ABOUT REALITY FROM WHAT I SEE. THAT IS WHAT WE CALL KNOWLEDGE.
IS THAT SO? AND PRAY TELL, FRIEND SANUS, IF IN A MOMENT YOU SAW A DISTANT BOAT ON THE HORIZON, WHAT WOULD YOU DO?
WHY, I WOULD CRY FOR JOY THAT WE MIGHT BE SAVED AT LAST, OF COURSE!

HOWEVER IF I SAID TO YOU THAT THERE WAS NOTHING BUT BLUE SKY AND BLUE WATER, YOUR DOUBT WOULD TAKE YOU
YOU WOULD SAY PERHAPS YOUR MIND HAS HOPED TOO MUCH FOR ITSELF AND CREATED THIS BOAT ALL ON ITS OWN.
YES, PERHAPS WE CANNOT ALWAYS BELIEVE WHAT WE SEE, BUT IF YOU CONFIRMED YOU SAW IT TOO, I WOULD BE COMFORTED IN THINKING A BOAT WAS INDEED THERE.

HA! SO YOU ADMIT IT, YOUR FOUNDATION OF KNOWLEDGE IS NOTHING MORE THAN THE WORD OF A MADMAN! COMFORTED INDEED! EVEN IF MY MIND WERE LUCID IN THAT MOMENT, I AM AS CRUEL AS I AM MAD. I MAY SEE PLAINLY THERE IS NO BOAT AND AGREE WITH YOU SIMPLY OUT OF SPITE OR MALICE.
SO YOU MUST TRUST ME TWICE, THAT I AM SANE AND THAT I AM HONEST. SANUS, MY FRIEND, YOU TRUST ENTIRELY TOO MUCH, I ASSURE YOU I DESERVE NO SUCH HONOR. WHEN YOU SAY YOU TRUST YOUR SENSES YOU MEAN YOU TRUST THEM ONLY INSOFAR AS OTHERS CONFIRM THAT THEY ARE SO.
YOU CAN'T BE TRUSTED TO STEER THE DAMN BOAT WHILE I SLEEP, I'LL GIVE YOU THAT.

SO YOU SEE IT IS NOT YOURSELF BUT OTHERS THAT FOUND YOUR KNOWLEDGE. BUT ALL OTHERS ARE MERELY A PART OF YOUR OWN SENSES, SO YOU ARE RELYING ON YOUR OWN SENSES OF OTHERS TO CONFIRM AS TRUE YOUR SENSES OF THE WORLD. WHICH IS NOT A SOUND FOUNDATION IN THE LEAST! IT IS NOTHING MORE THAN CIRCULATION!
NO, MY FRIEND, IT IS REASON ALONE THAT CAN BE TRUSTED TO ALWAYS BE STEADY AND CERTAIN. IT MUST ALONE ALSO BE THE SOURCE OF ALL KNOWING. TWO AND TWO IS ALWAYS FOUR, WHETHER YOU CONFIRM IT FOR ME OR NOT.

Tautology is a statement that is trivially true and completely uninformative, for example "the sun is the sun"

Does experience or reason justify our beliefs?

What **sensory experience** tells us might be false. We need to rely on what others tell us, but they could be wrong as well.

Reason can give us truths, such as “4+4=8” or “the “Sun is the Sun”, but these truths are mere uninformative tautologies.

Can we Solve the Dilemma?