

Global scepticism essay sample



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If you hold your hand in front of your face, and move it slowly away, it be can observed as getting smaller. However, most people seem to agree that your hand doesn't get smaller in reality. Do your eyes deceive you? Or is it that objects actually do just get smaller and bigger, and that distance does not exist: things just happen to have to be a certain size before you can touch them. This kind of stance towards what your senses seem to convey to you about the world is known as 'scepticism'.

Scepticism' is derived from the Latin word 'sceptikos', which means to doubt. In philosophy this usually refers to doubting the evidence of our senses, and hence doubting whether reality is how it appears. It can be used as a method of conducting philosophical investigations, or as a view of the world - living with most of one's beliefs suspended. Philosophical scepticism originated in ancient Greek philosophy. One of its first backers was Pyrrho of Elis (360-275 B. C.), who adopted 'global scepticism'.

This is the belief that normal reality is totally false. This view of the world has been popular from Thales of Miletus' 'everything is water' in 585BC, up to the current day where an alternate reality is addressed in the popular film 'The Matrix'. One of Plato's students was a global sceptic. He would never say anything when there was a question about global scepticism. He would only raise a finger, and that, according to him, was the eternal truth. Thus we can see, even from the outset of the notion, there seems to be a problem - complete impracticality.

If someone truly believed that things were not at all as they were perceived, they would not be able to carry out a normal day, as Pyrrho of Elis soon

found out when his fellow citizens saw that he was prone to falling down holes. In Descartes' 'Meditations on First Philosophy', the mighty task of defeating the sceptic, thus finally proving global scepticism to be false, was tackled head on. Rene Descartes (1596-1650) was a French philosopher, mathematician and part-time mercenary. He is equally notable for both his groundbreaking work in philosophy as well as mathematics.

As the inventor of the Cartesian coordinate system, he formulated the basis of modern geometry, which in turn influenced the development of calculus. In his attempt to refute scepticism, he himself employed methodological scepticism, which is a method of using doubt to work further towards the truth. He decides to treat anything that it is possible to doubt as false. He is not concerned with what is likely, but what is possible. When Descartes runs his belief system through the fine comb of scepticism, he realises that he has lost confidence in most of his normal beliefs.

He even goes as far to say that it is possible that God does not exist if his belief system were to undergo this kind of rigorous screening, a very risky statement in the times in which he was writing where inquisition was conducted at the slightest hint of anything contradictory to church teachings. The first of Descartes six meditation reveals four situations which have the potential to distort our perceptions enough to invalidate a series of knowledge claims.

He addresses situations in which senses are tricked, such as when a square tower looks round from a distance, or a pain is felt by an amputee in a leg that is no longer there. He gives the example of dreaming: in a dream, one's

senses perceive things that seem real, but do not actually exist. (This idea is similar to what Chuang Tzu writes after dreaming that he is a butterfly.) Thus, one cannot rely on the data of the senses as necessarily true. This leads him, using his 'if you can doubt, chuck it out' attitude to beliefs, to accept that much of what he would previously have claimed to 'know' was in fact a set of naive assumptions.

The most knowledge invalidating argument Descartes presents is that of a mind so powerful that it could deceive us, casting doubt on all we can know of the world and the properties it contains. However, even though the deceiver can falsify our perceptions, it does not have the power to falsify what we "seem" to perceive. Descartes also concludes that the powers to think and exist are untouchable by the deceiver. From this, Descartes tries to arrive at something indubitable so he might be able to rebuild a new system of beliefs, free of errors.

This knowledge would be 'a priori', which means 'knowable just by thinking', without any previous experience. Initially, Descartes arrives at only a single principle: if I am being deceived, then surely "I" must exist. Most famously, this is known as *cogito ergo sum*. From this Descartes thinks he has defeated scepticism, and feels he knows one thing for certain - my mind exists. He thought he had achieved a priori synthetic knowledge. This, when it is stood alone, seems to support solipsism: the belief that there is no physical world, just one mind, your own, which is creating these sensations.

Whilst this does not seem a very encouraging piece of information - the only thing you can know for certain is that you exist - it does at least confirm that

something you do at least, physically exist. Or does it? It could be commented on that Descartes has only established the existence of some thoughts or conscious experience. There is little evidence that these experience must belong to any self or 'I'. Perhaps thoughts can exist by themselves, independent of thinkers. Moreover, Descartes assumes that the evil demon has no power to affect his reasoning.

This seems a rash claim, seeing as he has just admitted the possibility of an evil demon that could distort and affect all his senses at will. Why would reasoning be immune to the attack? Thus we can see, scepticism, both global and ordinary seems more and more unlikely to be proved false. It appears we cannot know whether the world we perceive is an accurate representation of the world as it really is. If we were in fact dreaming, it would imply that there must be some basis of our dreams in reality. How closely our dream resembles reality would depend on how imaginative we are in this dream.

Is our experience of drinking chocolate in this dream simply a combination of drinking and chocolate? And is our experience of drinking simply a combination of eating and liquids? The real world could be radically different from the way it appears to us and, because we may never penetrate the veil of either perception, or the dream which we seem to be experiencing so vividly. A seemingly shrewd observation is that if the world we perceive did not, at least roughly, match the world as it really is, then we would have died out long ago as a race, because we would be unable to hunt in order to feed ourselves.

Or is it simply that we have evolved so as our senses give us a helpful perception of reality so as to aid us in survival, even though we may be observing a highly distorted picture. Moreover, whilst the notion of a demon or virtual reality machine causing our sensations seems far-fetched, we have no way of verifying that this is in fact the real world. Such doubts will remain so long as there is a gap between the world we perceive and the world as it is. If we could verify the accuracy of our sensations by comparing them with the actual physical objects themselves, then such scepticism could be refuted instantly.

Unfortunately, our brains and perception limit us, so even if we try to infer the existence of a material world by the fact that we are alive and thinking as Descartes did, such an inference can always be called into question; for we would still be making such an inference if there were no such world. Is all hope lost for a proof to substantiate scepticism? Whilst it may be impossible for all scepticism to be proved incorrect, global scepticism has several flaws. Recall that Descartes began his enterprise by raising doubts about all his previous beliefs.

To doubt all of your beliefs is to claim a global scepticism. It is often argued that such global scepticism is not as easy as Descartes made it appear. So what difficulties does it face? First, it is important to note that to claim to doubt all beliefs quickly leads into problems. To consistently doubt all beliefs involves doubting the statement of global scepticism itself. To claim that 'all beliefs are doubtful' implies that the very belief 'all beliefs are doubtful' is itself doubtful.

Consequently global scepticism cannot be stated coherently without also bringing itself into question. Thus we can see, not everything can be doubted at once and if we are to doubt one set of beliefs we are also going to have to take certain beliefs for granted. This could in itself be seen as a proof that global scepticism is wrong. Regular scepticism may be tougher to counter. The claim that 'because our senses deceive us some of the time, they might always deceive us', seems its most vulnerable assertion.

We notice that senses sometimes deceive, precisely because we can identify and correct errors. The fact that we are aware that senses deception takes place from time to time actually presupposes that for the rest of the time our senses do not deceive us. A similar argument can be made against the sceptical claim that we may always be dreaming since when dreaming, we can't tell if we are awake or not. It makes no sense to presuppose that someone could be dreaming all the time since the concept of dreaming is in part determined by that of being awake.