

Disciple: You were leading up to the question of the purpose of life.

Philosopher: Yes, to answer that question is the highest aim of our inquiry. But we cannot grasp the answer at once, but must approach it by dint of hard effort and patient investigation. We must begin first by considering man's place in the universe.

D: But this question seems to me almost as difficult and remote as the first. How will it help us to answer?

P: To any purpose in life which we postulate, D., one could always challenge us by asking why, and we could answer only by referring to a more remote and exalted goal for which our first answer was a means. But our critic could again challenge us and we would be forced back again. We are caught in a vicious regress. To escape (and we can and should escape) we must contemplate the human situation.

D: Well, then, what can we answer to such a broad question?

P: The answer I give you cannot be complete, for to know man's place in the universe would be to know everything, at least everything of importance, and our science does not begin to approach this high study. Nevertheless, we should not go to the extremes of scepticism. We know some things of importance. By investigation and reasoning we can know more. We know enough to give provisional answers to our questions, and provisional guides for action.

D: But what, in fact, do we know? Can we trust our senses and our common reason? But the findings of science affront our common sense at every turn. Can we trust our intellect? If so, how did the edifices of the philosophers fall in the hands of their critics? Did they not crumble into ruin? Can we trust even in science, when theories crash down before new theories, and these in turn fall in a few decades?

P: Indeed, our perennial doubts arise to plague us. And so it is that some philosophers, seeing the foundations of belief disintegrating in the acid of criticism, have taken refuge in scepticism and enfolded themselves in a vague unknowing. It is easy to answer all hard questions with an "I don't know" and let it go at that. However, if

PURPOSE
BASED
ON
MAN'S
PLACE
IN
UNIVERSE

WE
HAVE
PARTIAL
KNOWLEDGE

SKEPTICAL
CHALLENGE

P: it were at all possible to give more affirmative answers, then an "I don't know" is an abdication of responsibility. If we are finally to be reduced to scepticism, well then it would be unfortunate, but inescapable. But are we reduced to this pass? It is incumbent on us to reex-

NEED TO EXAMINE SCEPTICISM

amine the arguments of the sceptic, and see what we can make of them. Well now all sceptical arguments seem to boil down to one, that we cannot prove the truth of any one of our beliefs, and therefore we have no reason to believe what we do. Is this not so?

THE SKEPTICAL ARGUMENT

O: Yes. Of any belief, we demand conclusive evidence for it. If offered we challenge, the evidence for that, and so on. If the evidence offered is of experience, we note the prevalence of illusion. If the evidence is deductive, we expose the unproved assumptions which lurk therein. Under criticism the bounds of knowledge shrink in space and time; the darkness closes in upon the individual, he retreats into the present moment, a pitiful flicker of light amid the encircling gloom.

RESULT: MOMENTARY SOLIPSISM

P: Precisely, we are left with the so-called 'solipsism of the Present Moment'. That "I am thinking" or that "I am experiencing such-and-such sense impressions" seems to be the firm rock bottom before which criticism cannot go. Alas, philosophers have clung to this last straw with tenacity matched only by their liberality in giving up all other knowledge. Some, like Descartes, have even tried to reconstruct the whole universe from this little atom of certainty. Abandoning the firmament, and ship, and lifeboat, he seeks to make his straw, by the magic of deductive reason, into an even firmer firmament than before.

One cannot blame them for making so much of their flicker, having nothing else on which to rely. Nor can we blame them if like Descartes they compare what they think they know with what they have, and think their fully knowledge must somehow be in their present experience somehow, and so go on deluding away. I, who think the rest of experience not so dark as they picture, think also their present experience not so bright. These philosophers have mistaken the reflected light of other experience in this for intrinsic brilliance.

Let us, therefore, perform the salutary service of extinguishing even this last flicker. If the present moment goes, too, philosophers may begin to look beyond their noses and recognize the legitimacy cognitively claims of broader experience. We therefore carry the destructive analysis of philosophers to its logical conclusion thus:

They say the statement, "I am having this sensation" is indubitably since the very sensation is being experienced as the proposition is framed.

possibility of internal experience implies external experience
(Kant, Max-Müller tr., Supp XXI)

(3)

P: But many doubts arise. Consider the phrase "am having". This implies a process, a passing through time, however short, but still not instantaneous. Ah, but any passing through time is open to the criticism that has reduced cognition to the present moment - it relies in part on

REFUTATION
OF
MOMENTARY
SOLIPSISM

memory, and memory can deceive! Can the sensation be instantaneous? Upon introspection (this whole critical method is based on introspection) it would seem not. Well then, can we prove we have this sensation? Not at all. Again, notice the "I". This came in without thinking. But does not the notion of "I" perceiving, a self having sensations, presuppose all sorts of knowledge beyond the present moment. Finally, and most damaging of all, what sense does it make to frame a proposition about present experience? Framing a proposition requires time, hence memory, and requires words, and words are suffused with meaning for beyond what is immediately given.

I conclude, therefore, that even solipsism of the present moment is an untenable resting place, and is to be criticized as uncertain.

O: Your argument, I must admit, is convincing. But are we not now in a worse state than ever? The solipsists, at least, had something to begin with. Now the darkness is complete. One must become an utter sceptic, it seems, doubting even his very doubt. We must give up in despair of knowing anything, much less answer the question of life's purpose.

FULLY
SKEPTICAL
REACTION

P: Not at all. I refuted solipsism of the present moment merely to carry the methods of the sceptical philosophy to their logical conclusion and, from that, to point up the fallacy of the whole approach. It reveals itself as completely destructive and barren. The conclusion would not be reprehensible if the arguments supporting it were sound. But I think I can show that the arguments themselves are intrinsically in error. Descartes led off modern philosophy on the wrong foot, and his critical method has been the scourge and bane of most of the philosophers since his day, has led philosophers from one absurdity to another, and has made philosophy ridiculous in the eyes of men.

SKEPTICAL
ARGUMENTS
BASICALLY
FALSE

On to the fallacy, then. Does it not strike you odd that philosophers have given well-wrought and convincing arguments to refute cogitative claims, that is, to refute the premises of arguments?

O: Yes, the procedure did strike me as odd and in a certain sense self-defeating, but why precisely escaped me until now. Now

D: it is clear to me that an argument that denies the possibility of knowledge is undermining its own premises, and refuting itself. But we seem to be in a worse state than ever, for we seem to find contradictions in the very concept of knowing. It is surely absurd to refute knowledge in general by using part of that knowledge as premises for our arguments. But we still have no basis for ~~belief~~ believing anything. It remains as true as it ever was that we have no proof that anything we believe is true. How can we be sure of anything, then?

P: Your point is well-taken, and here we are in complete agreement with the sceptical philosophers: WE HAVE NO PROOF THAT ANYTHING WE BELIEVE IS TRUE. For even a cursory study of mathematics reveals that all proof stems from unproved premises, and that an unproved element is indispensable to all reasoning. But from here on we part company. The sceptical philosophers identify proof with knowledge, and conclude therefore, that we know nothing because we can prove nothing. To me, this conception of "knowledge" is incorrect. For example, I believe many things that scientists tell me is true about the world. The scientists who state these things are aware of the observations and reasoning upon which they are based, but in general I am not. On the doctrine that only proof constitutes knowledge, the scientist alone would know, not I. Only one who has directly experienced something would know it, while people who he tells of his experience do not know it.

No, this concept of knowledge is deficient. I would suggest the following as a provisional definition: KNOWLEDGE IS TRUE BELIEF. That is, we know something if we believe it, and if it happens to be true. This is not quite satisfactory, I admit, for the question of verification and the meaning of "true" is still very much up in the air. Nevertheless, it is sufficient at this time to lead us away from the sceptical argument.