

Epistemology from Passivity: An Argument against the Position of Complete Skepticism of an External World

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The problems of Epistemological Solipsism are present in the minds of all those beginning philosophical inquiry as, perhaps, the most intriguing and difficult of questions—directly mystifying the universe and making panic stretch across the psyches of young philosophers in fear that *they* may be the only thing that exists. For those who continue on with philosophy for any period of time, such a problem likely never loses its difficulties, but maintaining that same level of ferocious intrigue seems unlikely. It is such a problem that many contemporary philosophers, so that they can actually *do* any productive philosophy, suspend their judgement or hold that the idea of Epistemological Solipsism whatsoever is redundant.¹ Many hold that the idea is incredulous, or they reason that there is no ‘good enough’ positive evidence in favor of such a viewpoint as Epistemological Solipsism and so, if such a view desires to be taken seriously, it must pass a high burden of proof for a positive argument in its favor.

The idea that radically skeptical positions of epistemology are simply lacking in utility or likelihood is a common one and often comes in two forms: the *soft* criticism and the *hard* criticism. In Bertrand Russell’s work, *Our Knowledge of the External World*, Russell states a similarly pragmatic view of extreme skepticism saying:

¹Insofar as if we choose to maintain it seriously, there can be no more important reflection past that specific point.

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The reason for this abstention from a universal criticism [of empiricism] is not any dogmatic confidence, but its exact opposite... we possess no radically different kind of knowledge . . . Universal scepticism, though logically irrefutable, is practically barren; it can only, therefore, give certain flavor of hesitancy to our beliefs, and cannot be used to substitute other beliefs for them. (45)

Where Russell says that the idea of Universal Skepticism is “practically barren,” he means that it holds no utility in any *actual* line of philosophical inquiry. In other words, it is a “conversation stopper.” This represents the soft criticism. Basically, the claim is that extreme skepticism is useless. This claim is not entirely specious. To the ethicist or the metaphysician, all that comes from the point of view of universal skepticism is shrugs and “maybes,” but no practical purpose is served to the rest of philosophy. Doubt is a tool for use in every single branch of philosophy, applied or theoretical; but doubt to the point of completion stops both application and theory.

The hard claim against universal skepticism can also be found in *Our Knowledge*, wherein Russell makes the claim that there is a difference between “verbal doubt” and “real doubt” (48). First, Russell claims there are certain things that it does not make sense to doubt at all—such as mathematics or logic. But ultimately, there are even things beyond that—like the idea that there are external objects that enter into a causal relationship with our senses—that also cannot be doubted (or that cannot be *really* doubted). The hard criticism is built on the claim that there is a very real difference between those things which we are able to doubt *truly*, and those things of which we are able to maintain only a *theoretical* doubt. Real doubt is when a truth value or conclusion seems to be truly variable or unknown at any given point in time. Verbal doubt is our ability to create a hypothetical situation in which the truth of our experience can be called into question. The main difference is, Russell asserts, you cannot be *truly convinced* of verbal doubt.

But arguments against the practicality or the possibility of extreme epistemological doubt fall on equally deaf ears from the point of view of the Universal Skeptic. The so-called *impracticality* of absolute doubt is a failure to solve a more primary philosophical problem. If you cannot provide a basis for *knowing* that we cannot doubt, or that we cannot sufficiently doubt, you have no right to make assertions past the original point of doubt or to ask for skeptical assertions to be justified. And their objections seem fairly reasonable; after all, whether or not it is “useful” to believe a proposition does not seem to have, upon first glance, much to do with the actual truth

value of the proposition itself. Therefore, the soft criticism seems to be empty to this breed of skeptic.

Furthermore, the hard criticism of Russell is even easier for the skeptic to refute; indeed, it may also be able to be refuted on religious grounds or even simply asserted. The hard claim that no one can *actually hold* doubt about certain beliefs is easily refuted.² The skeptic need only say with sincerity, “I in fact doubt what you say cannot be doubted,” and that is seemingly sufficient.³

It seems as though the Epistemological Sceptics hold a two-fold criterion for the burden of proof for knowledge of the external world. Firstly, that there is no way to know if there is anything outside of those ideas I hold personally.⁴ Secondly, that there is no reason to believe that, if there were something else, we could have any idea as to what that thing is.

This is the position I will call Epistemological Solipsism, whose thesis claim can be stated in three propositions:

- 1) I can have no knowledge as to whether or not there is a world independent of myself.
- 2) I can assert nothing as to the causal story of my sense experience.
- 3) If I tried to establish a causal story, I would have no reason to choose one possible causal story from another.

My response to Epistemological Solipsism is to deny in total the first proposition by appealing to what I will call the “Principle of Passivity.” Furthermore, I will show how the removal of this first proposition makes the truth of the remaining propositions much weaker than before.

Solipsism and Passivity

Though, at least in part, the contemporary iteration of Classical Universal Skepticism may make the claim of Epistemological Solipsism as though the position remains untouched even now, the most significant grounding for this discussion is found in the Modern period. The discussion begins mostly with the Cartesian form of doubt as found in

²As a universal claim, it only needs one example for falsification.

³Provided, of course, that the skeptic herself is acting reasonably.

⁴Though there may also be doubts about whether there is even an “I,” I will personally assume the existence of a light version of the Cartesian Self: that which is the center consciousness of experience.

The Meditations. The skeptics have a very useful tool in their arsenal when it comes to the history of ideas. The Cartesian standard of knowledge is beneficial to the skeptic because their definition of knowledge is such that the only things that can be said to be known are those things that cannot be doubted in any way at all. To many, Descartes is convincing in his display that conceivability of doubt is all that matters whatsoever for doubt to be legitimate. Descartes practically gives the first solipsistic premise to the skeptics in the second of the *Meditations on the First Philosophy* when he says:

Is there also anyone of these attributes [of the mind] that can be properly distinguished from my thought or that can be said to be separate from myself? For it is of itself so evident that it is I who doubt, I who understand, and I who desire, that it is here unnecessary to add anything by way of rendering it more clear. (Descartes and Veitch 98)

Descartes says that it is a conceivable doubt that all that he senses, doubts, and understands, have actually been products of his own mind. And if such a doubt is conceivable at all, then the thesis claim of the Epistemological Solipsist is already earned. Not in his success in *doubting* but in his failure to *escape* that very same doubt (and the extended idea that such a doubt is, in fact, inescapable) the skeptic can hide behind the exercise of the *Meditations* as a demonstration of the lack of reason's capacity to escape itself.

It is worth noting that Descartes himself might use language⁵ that suggests a passive subject of experience. But it is put much more clearly by British Empiricists Locke and Berkeley who use remarkably similar language to describe the situation of passivity. In Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* he says that he has knowledge that there are external objects because, ". . . sometimes I find that I cannot avoid having those ideas . . . I can at my pleasure recall to my mind the *idea* of light . . . [but] I cannot avoid the ideas that the *sun puts in me*" (416). Locke goes on to say that some ideas, "force themselves" upon him (412). Similarly, Berkeley states in his *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*:

. . . whatever power I may have over my own thoughts, I find the ideas actually perceived by sense do not have the same *dependence* on my will. When in broad day light I open my eyes, it is not in my power to choose whether I shall see or not or to determine what particular objects shall present themselves to my view . . . There is,

⁵Even at times comes very close to outright stating.

therefore, some other will or spirit that produces them.
(453)

In both cases, the philosophers agree that there are certain things that are experienced against the *will* of the *experiencer*. Both of these philosophers come to radically different conclusions about the cause of those experiences, but both agree that they are not in the will of the Perceiver herself. This is what is meant by the Principle of Passivity.

More specifically Locke and Berkeley both refer several times to the inner minds of perceivers. They both agree that images and sensations can be recalled from memory and form ideas. Ideas about which we have a justified degree of certainty. In some way, if I attempt to visualize a purple tree, I have no contradiction in visualizing such an object. I may be said to have difficulty focusing on the image itself, but this is not the same thing as being *unable* to imagine such a thing. This mental visualization takes any course I will it to, I may try to remember my childhood phone number, I may imagine myself baking cookies, or I may refer to memories of particular sensations I have had throughout time. In other words, there is a sense in which I control the images I bring up in my own mind. *But* when I rely on my senses for a visual image or a particular sound or texture, it is completely lacking in any contingency of my will whatsoever. To Berkeley and to Locke, this distinction is no mere triviality. In fact, *passivity* of sense experience seems to be one of the more convincing parts of both of their arguments. Summarily, it seems to suggest that there are some things I have no control in sensing, so there must be a world external, at least external from *myself*.

Herein the threat to the first part of the Epistemological Solipsist thesis is immediately present. It seems as though, if Locke and Berkeley are correct and passivity of experience *really does* necessitate something other than self and internal self-ideas, the solipsistic premise that *there is no reason to believe that there is an external world apart from your self* seems to crumble.

However, the skeptic has ready access to the principles of mid-century psychology and can at this point in time assert with the same level of conceivability that the so-called external world, begotten from the points of view of the two British empiricists, is conceivably only a subconscious self, interacting with the observing self to create the images. This way the skeptic may claim that there is no true observation had against the will of a perceiver, because it is the perceiver herself who creates the images that they mistook to be against their own will. In doing so, the skeptic may say that the subconscious theory of sense experience is just as conceivable as any of the other possible options. And so, there is no more or less valuable reason to assert anything other than Epistemological Solipsism. But, were

the skeptic to go down such a route she would be making a potentially fatal mistake when it comes to the hypothesized perceiver. When a skeptic appeals to the subconscious, she has changed the definition of what is meant by a perceiver. For the skeptic's position to be seriously conceivable it must be possible that there is a self that is identified as both a perceiver and a subconscious somehow inextricably linked together in a give-and-take of causal relationships. The skeptic rightly needs not explicate any way in which the perceiver and the subconscious create the individual self or how they causally interact specifically, except to show us that it is possible. Scientific inquiry has shown us that, in some sense, it is possible for such an arrangement to be made. But this conception of the self as having two parts goes against the epistemological exercise originally asserted by Descartes and continued by both Locke and Berkeley.

The perceiver, as the modern philosophers in question define it, is one of *epistemological awareness*. All three philosophers may have a different conception of what is meant by the word "person," but they generally share what is meant by a perceiver-self. When referring to knowledge, they believe that they are referring to that which they are specifically aware of. In fact, in his critique of innate ideas Locke asserts, ". . . to imprint anything on the mind without the mind's perceiving it seems to me hardly intelligible" (319). The way in which they are attempting to account for knowledge is by appealing to an explicit awareness. They take the seemingly common-sense stance of knowledge having to *have the ability* to be called upon to actually maintain that it is knowledge.

The effect that this conception of experience has on the objection of the "subconscious" or "dream" premise is profound. The British empiricists have no *reason* to assert a subconscious because there is no way to have an experience of a subconscious whatsoever, by definition of what is meant in the objection by subconscious as 'some hypothetical part of myself that *causally interacts* with my conscious awareness *without* that conscious awareness being wise to the action at all.' The premise of causal interaction between conscious and subconscious only *maintains* the idea of passivity. The idea of passivity survives even the possibility of subconscious, because the "epistemic self" or the "knowing awareness" or whatever it is to be named is passively *acted upon* by the subconscious itself. So, necessarily, the subconscious (though possibly being part of a greater "person") is external from that part which experiences the world. Therefore, given the principle of passivity is understood how it is intended by Locke or Berkeley, it seems as though an external world of *some sort* is necessarily existent.

The most extreme part of the Epistemological Solipsism thesis is incompatible with the truth of such a line of reasoning. It may be the case that there is a correct conception of personhood that *does* require parts (like

a subconscious) other than the part that is *aware*. This would do nothing to change the fact that, if there are experiences that I do not choose to have, something other than my awareness must actually be causing them. Whatever causes things that I do not will to experience, is external from my will to experience (and my awareness), and therefore the first claim of the skeptic's thesis fails.

On the Second Premise of Epistemological Solipsism

With the actual *solipsistic* part of the skeptic's claim seemingly defeated, it seems as though it would be easy enough for the skeptic to fall back on the second part to the thesis claim: that, no matter the existence of an external world, no assertion as to the content of that world would be more or less reasonable than any other assertion. In fact, there may be some core truth to the skeptic's claim here. The first half of their premise was dealt with in an argument that almost seems deductive. The second half of their premise, though, seems to have no such immediately rational escape. There are many ways to account for passivity; all that is needed is something having a causal relationship in a certain way with our senses. Any number of possible explanations could be given for those experiences we have against our will.

But, before giving a total concession to the skeptic, we should briefly consider the idea that we may yet have a reason to actually consider choosing one causal story for our passive experience over another. To do this we must refer to the *content* of our passive experiences. While I cannot quite speak for any other mind, I have a particular set of passive experiences. These experiences display a uniformity that seems testable via measures of scientific analysis. So, the passive experiences (the sense-datum) that I receive seem to be remarkably consistent. This is shown in a number of ways, including the fact that as I have typed this I have blinked an uncounted number of times and the world has maintained its shape to the best of my ability to judge while doing so.

The first part of the skeptic's argument stated that I am patently *unable* to know whether or not there is something external from myself. If this were true, the second argument—that I can assert nothing as to the causal stories of my sense experience and that if I tried to establish a causal story I have no reason to choose one possible causal story from another—is much stronger. If the first premise holds true, then I cannot even say about the second premise that there is anything knowable about my sense experience apart from the fact that I am having it.

But without the first premise, I know that there is an external world. And while I may have no purely *a priori* or *necessary* reason for choosing one causal story over another, it is not the case that I have no reason at all. I may infer from the content of my passive sense experience that there are certain conceptions of the world that are *more likely* than others through rational tools such as Occam's Razor, and perhaps the *most likely* explanation of my sense experience would be that my sense experience is an accurate representation. It may be most sensible to say that what I see is what there is, or else it might be the simplest point of view. But that hypothesis is a matter that could be debated. I wanted only to say about the second claim of Epistemological Solipsism that there may be reason to distinguish between possible causal explanations of sensory experiences.

Of course, it is worth noting that, on the level of methodological Cartesian doubt, my objection to the second premise of this hypothetical skeptic is very likely not satisfactory or wholly satisfactory to the skeptic. Debates about the Skeptical standard of knowledge—the way in which they apply that standard—the legitimacy of Occam, and the skeptic's point of view of probability are all worthy debates which I will not discuss here. My point is only that there is necessarily an external existence from that which I perceive passively, and that there *may* be a reason (flush with the content of my passive experiences) that gives a natural predilection towards some form of understanding the causal story over some other, less reasonable understanding.

Works Cited

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