

Eli Hirsch. *Radical Skepticism and the Shadow of Doubt: A Philosophical Dialogue.* Bloomsbury 2017. 248 pp. \$47.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781350033849); \$24.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781350033856).

As its title suggests, this book is about skepticism. And it duly discusses many of the topics you would expect from such a title, including Descartes, Hume, Putnam, and Williamson. It discusses safety conditions on knowledge and internal realism, disjunctivism about perception, and Bayesian updating. It puts forward some new arguments and argues against old ones. It refines terms.

But it's not a conventional work of analytic philosophy. In Hirsch's words, it is a 'dialogue/play,' set in a Yeshiva bathroom in Manhattan, conducted by three old friends. While skepticism is the main theme, like any conversation between friends, it bounces between reminiscences, jokes, digressions, and asides. Another sign of its unconventionality can be found in the bibliography: the most referenced thinker is not one of the luminaries mentioned above, but Samuel Beckett, the absurdist playwright. Not only that, the shadow of the title, which recurs and haunts the work, is intimately linked to a feeling—the feeling of unfathomable loneliness.

Unfathomable loneliness isn't the bread and butter of analytic philosophy. It sounds more the preserve of Sartre or Kierkegaard or Nietzsche. But a central claim of the book is that we can't understand radical skepticism without understanding unfathomable loneliness. Or, maybe better—we can't understand radical skepticism without *feeling* unfathomable loneliness.

And a further claim is that this loneliness is not something we *can* feel; we can't imagine, as the skeptic asks us to, that our friends and family are merely hallucinations, or the products of a simulation's code. We can't imagine never having connected to any human ever—our self disintegrates at the prospect, Hirsch argues.

That means that skepticism is impossible. Accordingly, Hirsch bears a superficial similarity to a distinguished band of philosophers, including those named above, who dismiss skepticism as something not to worry about. But it *is* only superficial. For Hirsch, skepticism has an untenable *emotional* consequence, rather than, as one might expect from an analytic philosopher, an untenable *logical* consequence. And the big take-home message of Hirsch's book, I think, is that the standard way of doing philosophy, at least sometimes, misses out by attending only to the cognitive part of our lives and not considering these emotional consequences. In what follows I'll firstly spell out one of Hirsch's central arguments, before briefly considering some salutary lessons to be learned from his book.

I assume most readers are familiar with skepticism in one form or another. Sometimes, you dream, and in the dream (at least, as far as you can recall) you don't think you're dreaming. Or consider the movie *The Matrix*. What you take to be reality is in fact a simulation your brain is wired up to—everything you experience is the product of computers and you are entirely misled about the true nature of reality.

There are some reasons, familiar to all philosophers, to take these possibilities seriously. But one of Hirsch's central theses is that contrary to what it might seem, we can't take these possibilities seriously. Properly to contemplate the skeptic's reasoning, to imagine oneself an envatted brain, is impossible. There are two interesting arguments for this, but for reasons for space I will concentrate only on the second.

Hirsch is good enough to give it to us clearly as three premises (I've rejigged the wording slightly):

- (i) If a being doesn't believe it has meaningfully interacted with other lives, it's impossible for it to have self-esteem
- (ii) If a being has no self-esteem, it doesn't have a self
- (iii) If a being doesn't have a self, it can't be rational. (179ff)

Now to entertain skepticism one has to try to believe one hasn't meaningfully interacted with other lives. It's not sufficient, and this is where so many have gone wrong, merely to try to believe that one has never interacted with one's inkbottle, or one's smartphone, or one's table. But one can't believe this, at least while being rational.

The rough idea behind premise (i) is that self-esteem is a comparative notion—one feels self-esteem by comparing oneself to others. One might feel self-esteem if one were particularly happy with the talk one gave at a conference, for example, but that will involve comparing one's talk, if not with the talks at the conference, with talks at other conferences, with what one takes to be a good talk.

According to (ii), we can get a handle on what the very abstract notion of a self is by considering what Hirsch calls 'self-hyphenated properties' (189). If one has a self, then one has such properties (exactly what the relation is between these properties and the self is obscure. Lev speaks of the self as being a 'configuration' of such properties, but explicitly says he's not looking for a 'reduction' (90)). Examples include self-respect, self-confidence, self-centeredness and self-discipline (page 189). And these properties, Lev holds, are also comparative—to judge one has to position oneself relative to other possessors of the property.

So, one can really only have a self, provided there are other selves around. The justification for (iii), according to Hirsch, is

A being that has no self, has no self-esteem, no self-discipline, no self-criticism. Such a being cannot be a responsible agent in any respect, and, in particular, cannot be a responsible cognitive agent who is committed to standards of truth and reason. (193)

Accordingly, the following is impossible: someone taking seriously the possibility that they are in the skeptical scenario while also being rational. And again, the reason for this is that to believe oneself in a skeptical scenario is to believe oneself to be etiolated by an unfathomable loneliness that strips one's self away, and with it one's rationality.

But, almost as important, this doesn't eradicate the skeptic's reasoning. It remains there. You can't rationally take it seriously, but it lingers nonetheless, and this provokes "epistemic anxiety" suffered by Hirsch's well-drawn Lev.

This is a very interesting argument. I propose to leave the assessment of its merits as a piece of epistemology to others more qualified. Rather, I want to concentrate on two areas not immediately related to mainstream analytic philosophy where I think we can learn by reflecting on Hirsch's book. Hirsch uses some premises about unfathomable loneliness to draw conclusions about skepticism. I want to consider the possibility here of going in the other direction: from skepticism to loneliness.

Hirsch is writing about extreme, unfathomable loneliness. But to the extent that it's deserving of the name, we should see connections between the extreme version and the more mundane versions that affect our (presumably unenvatted) existences. The horrible thing for Hirsch's Lev and skepticism is that it means one has never interacted with one's partner or kids or parents or friends.

But there are such people out there, unfortunately. And there are many people in less extreme, but still very painful positions: aged widows, awkward teens, isolated single mums, and so on. While their loneliness might not be as complete as a brain in a vat, I think it arguably lies on a continuum with them.

If that is so, then here's a question: what are the cognitive consequences of loneliness? How does being lonely affect how one thinks about the world? This is the sort of question not typically considered by analytic philosophy, and normally left to art. But Hirsch has opened the way to ask such questions, important not only for philosophy but for humanity.

That's the first thing I think worth taking from Hirsch's book and from his way of presenting philosophy. The second is that exploring the links between explicit beliefs and these more questionable shadows seems like a truly epochal question, and one that philosophers should pay more attention to. Does Paul Ryan (replace with a politician of the appropriate affiliation as you wish), for example, really believe the trickle down economic theory that he uses to justify tax cuts? Or does he perhaps feel the opposite of Hirschian epistemic anxiety about it, an epistemic comfort that comes from not truly believing it (because if he truly believed it, then he could be wrong about the thing which defines his life)? Or does he just like the way it makes him feel? These seem like important questions to ask both as philosophers, as people who care about what's good to believe, and as humans, and in my view it's one of the greatest merits of Hirsch's book that it so vividly questions the subtle interplay and fuzziness between belief and feeling.

In sum, then, this is an entertaining and thought-provoking book which asks important questions, both about technical questions in epistemology, but also more broadly about the role philosophy and ideas should play in our lives beyond the seminar room. I heartily recommend it to both experts and beginners alike.

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