

Skepticism and the Empiricists

Jason Taylor

Okanagan University College

George: John, we spoke briefly yesterday about our respective views on skepticism, but I don't think I truly understood what you were saying. Do you think you could elaborate a little more?

John: Sure. But, since yesterday's discussion was unsuccessful, I think my view on skepticism would be better understood if I stated the extent of human knowledge. First, I think that there are three ways that you can come to know things, viz. Intuition, Reason (or demonstration) and Sensation...

David: Hang on John; can I ask if you still assert the 'idea' idea?

J: Yes. I still think that all that we are immediately aware of are ideas and that we get these certain mental items (phantasms, notions, or species) from my senses.

D: Ok.

G: I agree, at least to the first part anyway.

J: If I have mental items, i.e. ideas, then all that I can know has to be concerning these items. That is to say that I can have no knowledge which supercedes my ideas, and the relations of agreement and disagreement between them.

D: Wait John. I understand you, but it seems like what you are doing is equating certainty and knowledge. Am I correct in saying that you think that the only things you can know are those things which you can be certain about?

J: Dave, that's exactly what I intend.

G: Okay, so we both understand you now. But if knowledge is certainty and it concerns only our ideas, what can we know?

J: We can know, I think, only four things (each obtained by one of the three faculties I mentioned earlier). They are, the existence of God, the existence of matter, the existence of ideas, and the existence of the mind. Of all things, it is only these that we can be certain.

G: I would like to hear how we come to be certain of the existence of matter.

J: This knowledge we gain by examining the agreement and disagreement of our ideas concerning bodies. That is, we notice a certain co-existence between the qualities of objects, and take them to

be existent in something, and we call it body. Then, if we consider partially, our ideas of bodies, we gain an abstract idea of a general substance that we call matter, which contains only the most basic and commonly possessed qualities.

D: What do you mean by qualities John?

J: By qualities I mean things of two types, viz., primary and secondary. Primary qualities are the actual qualities of the minute parts of the mind independent objects; while secondary are the powers that these minute parts have to cause in us ideas. Primary qualities are the motion, figure, extension, and solidity of an object; and secondary qualities are those gained only by sense - color, smell, bitterness, and so on.

G: I have something to say about this, but before I do, pray do tell how we come to know of minds and of God.

J: Referring to the three types of knowledge (intuition, demonstration and sensation) it is obvious that we come to know of minds by way of intuition. We can know, through no mediation — only introspection — that we have minds, because a faculty of the mind is to perform operations on the ideas had. That is we can know we have a mind because, the mind can compare, combine, and abstract these simple ideas to form complex ideas. And while we know of minds by intuition, we come to know of God by demonstration.

D: How is it that we come to know of God?

J: Certainly it is the case that everything has a cause? And if this is the case, then there must be a prime mover, and that's God. What I'm saying is that God must exist because if there were no first cause then we would have infinite chain of causes and this is absurd. George, you seem as though you want to say something, so I'll let you speak, but just let me point out how all this relates to skepticism. For me, to be a skeptic means to be someone that doubts that we can be certain of our knowledge. And you can see where my doubt enters in: anything that is not included in these four things, viz. God, matter, mind, and ideas is purely faith and opinion for it does not concern the identity or diversity of our ideas, the co-existence of ideas, or the relation between ideas.

D: Let me clear one thing up, George, before you cut in. Do you claim that what we can know is limited by our ideas?

J: Yes. In fact, want of ideas, want of the examination of our ideas, and want of relevant relations between ideas are all causes for lack of knowledge.

G: Okay. That all seems clear, but I don't think you are correct in a number of things. Firstly, let me say I think we can only have 'notion' of the mind. We cannot directly know of a thing that is performing certain operations on ideas, for if we introspect, that is not what we perceive. What we perceive instead are the operations performed, and never the thing performing.

D: I agree.

G: Do not take me to be denying the existence of the mind; I'm simply saying that we cannot have an idea of it. However, what is more pertinent is this talk of mind independent bodies. I fear it is a

skeptical position that you are in John. What reason do you have to believe in the external world? Rather, let me ask if you accept the dogma that all we are immediately aware of are ideas?

J: Yes, that is what we all agreed to.

G: And that we are only mediately aware of the external world?

J: Of Course.

G: Well then how can we know that the way the world is, resembles the way our ideas are? It is possible that our ideas could totally mis-resemble the external objects, don't you agree?

J: It is possible, yes. But I think that you missed the point George, for I am merely claiming that my ideas merely represent the world; and as you'll accept it is possible for anything to represent another thing.

G: What do you mean?

J: If we come on to a murder scene, and you asked me how the victim was laying, I could position my self as a representative of the victim. Or, more to the point I could use something completely unlike a body — a sack of potatoes or a chalk outline — to represent the victim.

G: Ok, I'll concede this point because I feel I have a stronger objection to raise with respect to your distinction on the qualities. Dave, did he not say that secondary qualities are in the mind, while primary ones are in the object?

D: I believe he did.

G: Well then because we never perceive primary qualities independent of secondary ones, and we are not able with all the faculties of the mind to separate them, how is it that primary qualities are not mind dependent also? If this is so, doesn't it follow that what one is the other is also; and that thus, both qualities are mind dependent?

J: There are at least two things I can reply with. First even if it is the case that we can never distinguish the two types of qualities, it simply does not follow that the objects don't have any qualities. All that we can truly say is that we can't know which ones the object has. But what's even more damning is that I think you have missed the point again, for what I said was that secondary qualities were the power in objects to produce certain ideas. Thus, while you took me to be purporting secondary qualities to be mind dependent, I said they were powers in the object.

Even still George, if I grant this argument, are you not just thrusting yourself into the greatest of all skepticism?

G: What do you mean?

J: By reducing all the qualities of objects to a standard of mind dependency you are removing the existence of the world!

D: John is right, George.

G: I know that, but what else is there except ideas? And is it not the greatest of all skepticism to deny the reality and truth of things? By asserting the existence of matter, as you do John, you invite skeptical arguments because you cannot be sure of the existence of matter. But worse still, you deny the truth of things: that all exists are ideas. But do not think these ideas exist independent of the mind — or independent of a cause. That is, the world consists of ideas, given to us, through God.

J: Your view on skepticism has caused the collapse of the whole world into the mind.

G: You speak harshly John. What have I taken from you? I accept that God exists; I accept that there are minds and ideas; I merely reject a view that is bound to invite skepticism, while it embraces skepticism itself.

D: Do you hear what you are saying George? You are claiming first that John's view is skeptical because it denies the reality and truth of things, when your view does as well. I shall show you: What reason do we have to believe that our ideas are given to us by God?

G: That is simple. I can cause in my mind certain ideas — like one of a three legged dog for instance — and here ideas are certainly active. But when I walk outside, I am constantly receiving ideas, and these must be caused by another spirit other than my own, so it must be God that causes them — because ideas can not exist in anything material, and thus only in the spirit.

D: But this is nonsense. If it were God who caused our ideas that we passively receive then do tell me how we are able to have imperfections in our ideas? An oar in water appears bent, but we know it is not actually bent. And this is but one instance of many illusions of sight; surely you cannot believe that God, a benevolent being is capable of deceiving?

And yet there is more trouble with your view, for this attack is purely off of your definition of skepticism. If we return to the original view of skepticism you will see that, as John said, you are the most extreme of skeptics, because for you, there is no world.

G: There is another reason why I deny the existence of the world, specifically matter. I do not think it is possible to have abstract general ideas (as you have claimed John). Tell me how it is that you can abstract you idea of triangle. This idea is supposed to contain nothing but the essentials of the concept; thus, abstracting triangles would give you three-sidedness. But when I have my idea of abstract idea of triangle I can conceive of no other but one which is isosceles, scalene, right angled, etc.

D: I must agree with you here George; there is no way that we can have abstract ideas without running into absurdities.

J: Surely you are making the mistake of taking abstract ideas as being pictorial. It is true that so long as ideas are picture in the mind, I cannot conceive of a abstract triangle; but, if my idea is not pictorial but composed of sentences, then you can see that my abstract idea of triangle could consist

of just that: "an object with three-sides" — but it may contain more, such as "an object with three angles, the sum, of which is equal to two right angles."

D: Lets leave that point for a while John, I need some time to think on it. Let me ask you about God. Is it true that you say John that we can know of Him demonstratively?

J: Yes.

D: I do believe that you have no grounds for this claim, but in order to be understood you must know the way that things are. There are two types of knowledge in this world, relations of ideas, which are concerned with demonstration and intuition, and matters of fact and existence. Relations of ideas are necessary truths, in the form of analytic sentences that can be known *a priori*. All things that belong to this category are matters of number and form, viz., mathematics.

The later type, matters of fact and existence are contingently true, synthetic sentences that can only be known *a posteriori*. These are all known with respect to three things, contiguity in space and time, resemblance, and cause and effect relations.

It is certainly an error to attribute anything but mathematics to the first group, as math is the only thing that delivers certainty by demonstration and intuition. Thus it is to the second half of the 'fork', matters of fact and existence, that the existence of God falls under. If this is so, because the denial of any matter of fact or existence never gives a contradiction (because they are only contingent truths), denying the existence of God doesn't give a contradiction. Indeed, it is of no contradiction to deny, as I do, the proposition that in order for something to come into existence it must have a cause.

G: You have then drawn doubt on God's existence...

D: Yes, but when things come down to it, if a skeptic so wishes, he may draw doubt on our idea of the external world, because you are right George, in supposing that the distinction between primary and secondary qualities is an empty distinction.

G: Thank you Dave. What's the result of your skepticism, then? Where do you go, with no God or matter?

D: I am not so severe as to deny the existence of the world though. I merely claim that, by accepting the idea 'idea' (as we all do), a skeptic may run rampant on our views.

J: How do you explain your belief in the world?

D: All our ideas of matters of fact and existence, we have because of the Custom or Habit.

G: Wait. If cause and effect are matters of fact and existence then you are saying that we have no reason to our belief in cause and effect (one of the venues of matters of fact)?

D: Precisely! Certainly neither of you hold that you can know of cause and effect through demonstration or reason?

J: Why not?

D: If we take a man, who has never experienced the world, but who has the highest faculty of reason, he will be unable to discern from his perception of the warmth and light of fire that it will consume him; nor from the transparency and fluidity of water that it will drown him. It is only by a constant conjunction of fire and pain that he will realize this.

J: You mean to say that there is nothing in the objects that will tell this man of the effect that the certain object will cause.

D: Precisely.

G: We can know it by a matter of fact though can't we? We know certain effects of causes, because we know that nature is uniform — because we know that certain things happened in the past and have always happened in the past?

D: It is only possible to know that nature is uniform though, through past experience; and this makes our argument circular, for we justify our inference of cause and effect on experience; and we justify our experience by the uniformity of nature; and we justify the uniformity of nature by experience; that's how it has always been. We have no reason then to accept the cause and effect relation except custom and habit.

J: Where does morality lie then Dave? By dividing all knowledge into two types, and denying that only things concerning mathematics belong in the *a priori*, analytic, necessary relation of ideas side, don't you demolish morality?

D: Certainly not. It properly belongs to reason concerning matters of fact and existence. For, it is obvious to see that we would not be obligated to follow contracts if we were not in a social position to be under contracts. I certainly hold that the virtues of instinct are generosity and compassion, while all other virtues are artificial. But this is not to say that a society of men could exist without either of these virtues natural or artificial.

G: You have yet to answer my question Dave, and it now seriously demands an answer: what is the result of your skepticism? We have no solid reason to accept the relation of cause and effect; there is no God; matter, if not destroyed totally is reduced to something unfathomable and use-less; and morals are now dependent upon society; what do we get from this?

D: Let me just say that we are, in being made aware of our limitations of knowledge, made humble and modest about what we can know. We should not proclaim with certainty any of these things which I have drawn doubt to. But this is not a bad thing.

Indeed it is not a bad thing to be skeptical, unless one is extreme. If we deny our own existence, and the veracity of our senses, then we are surely in an incurable state. But, if we adopt a more moderate form of this skepticism, then we will properly question things that we may have taken for granted otherwise. Indeed it is necessary for the successful study of philosophy to adopt this moderate view.

J: Despite all that you say on your behalf Dave, and I think you would agree, what best fits my experience, is not that all there is, is our ideas, but rather that there is an external world that causes our ideas.

D: Yes, certainly. But we are being dogmatic to say that it really exists.

G: We should call it a night. I'm sure there's a response about you qualities distinction that I can make to you John, I just need time to think it over.

J: I look forward to our next talk George.