

Assess the view that knowledge is impossible

Philosophical scepticism and ordinary everyday scepticism are very different. The difference between both types of scepticism is that ordinary scepticism is doubt that the train will come on time for example, whilst philosophical sceptics believe knowledge is impossible. Global scepticism doubts everything for the purpose of an academic study this differs from ordinary scepticism due to it being on a much larger scale. The best example of a sceptic is Descartes. He was the first philosopher to think so deeply into scepticism. Descartes wrote six meditations, the first named 'Method of Doubt'. This meditation had three waves; The Senses, Dreaming and Malignant Demon. Each wave looked at a different theory of scepticism.

There are many different arguments that conclude knowledge is impossible. The Infinite Regress of Reason, Closed Belief System and Brain in a Vat theory are the three examples which will be looked at, in detail, as to how they came to the conclusion that knowledge is impossible.

The Infinite Regress of Reason makes the point that no belief can be 'known' as it must be supported by other beliefs and these again must be supported by further beliefs. Every proposition made must have beliefs behind them and therefore the regression is Infinite. For example, a geography scholar may say that the Amazon River is the longest river in the world he may back this up by saying he read it in a book and has seen on maps however it isn't possible to trust these propositions unless we can check where the information, in the book and on the maps, came from and then check that evidence and so on. The sceptical conclusion therefore, must be that we cannot acquire knowledge.

The Closed Belief System is an argument that means having beliefs which are backed up by evidence in a cycle that continues. This means that the philosopher is unable to step 'outside of the box' and see where their belief started and if it has truth within it. An example of this is a man who believes that the government is a conspiracy theory. He is unable to step out of his 'box' and see that he is wrong. This is often apparent in life and the sceptical conclusion for this Closed Belief System is our knowledge is false and so we know nothing.

The Brain in a Vat argument is the theory that the whole world around us isn't real but is only electrical impulses that the brain creates for us. The name explains what some philosophers think to be real; that our brains really are in Vats and being controlled. An example of this is in Descartes' first Meditation - in the third wave of doubt (the evil demon argument). This is one example of a sceptic's theory: A scientist in the year 2560 is sending impulses through a secretly obtained brain to give it the illusion that it is living a life and that the life is a real experience.

However there are criticisms to these theories such as The Infinite Regress of Reason can be stopped by Foundationalism and therefore isn't infinite. This theory says there are things in this world that we can know for sure and all other beliefs can be built-up on top of these foundational beliefs. Beliefs that justify themselves or need no justification are foundational beliefs and these beliefs justify others. This classic reaction to the Infinite Regress is called Foundationalism. Examples of beliefs which are foundational are maths, geometry and the fact that I am having an experience.

The Closed Belief System can be criticised also. If all our knowledge isn't real (as the theory states) and we don't really touch, taste, see things etc, then we really cannot know anything. However we can recognise when our senses fool us, for example when we see diffraction of an object in water that really hasn't bent or when a surface appears smooth but science tells us it isn't really. So if sense deception is recognised our senses cannot be deceiving us all the time. We must have real experiences with our senses in order to recognise when we are being deceived. This is a form of stepping out of the 'box' as it gives us a foundational belief that we are actually sensing aspects of our experiences and therefore must be having some form of an experience.

The Brain in a Vat argument can be criticised because the theory says that everything we 'experience' isn't real, however the common sense option explained by the philosopher Moore argues that we cannot doubt everything. Global scepticism can only be an academic exercise because believing nothing, isn't an option, as the person believing would have no use or point in any belief system as their thoughts wouldn't even be real. Moore tells us we can trust basic claims of common sense because even though we cannot prove these claims they are said to be so basic that they don't need to be proven but should be simply accepted. For example, the existence of physical objects shouldn't be doubted even though they cannot be explicitly justified using language. Therefore the Brain in a Vat theory cannot really be genuine as it is rejected by common sense.

In conclusion, the theory of scepticism, although a strong argument in the short term, when thought about more thoroughly is fundamentally flawed because the criticisms of each argument evaluated proves that there must be truth in this world for us to be able to doubt anything. Although philosophical scepticism, on some levels, can help us see what can not be proven or justified, it also helps us understand that knowledge is indeed possible and that we must all have some aspect of truths in our beliefs. For example Descartes said: 'I think therefore I am'. This quote explains that knowledge of having a present experience is true and from this knowledge we can build up other claims (for example the claim of physical objects proven to ones' self by using senses and the common sense theory).