

# “Forms of Philosophical Skepticism”

James Conant

## Handout of Quotations, Examples, and Other Things

### I. Russell and the Nomads

#### 1. Bertrand Russell’s Table

Any statement as to what it is that our immediate experiences make us know is very likely to be wrong. It seems to me that I am now sitting in a chair, at a table of a certain shape, on which I see sheets of paper with writing or print.... All this seems to be so evident as to be hardly worth stating, except in answer to a man who doubts whether I know anything. Yet all this may be reasonably doubted, and all of it requires much careful discussion before we can be sure that we have stated it in a form that is wholly true. To make our difficulties plain, let us concentrate attention on the table. To the eye it is oblong, brown and shiny, to the touch it is smooth and cool and hard; when I tap it, it gives out a wooden sound.... [Then Russell proceeds to consider each of these qualities of the table.] The *shape* of the table is no better. ... [T]he 'real' shape is not what we see; it is something inferred from what we see. And what we see is constantly changing in shape as we, move about the room; so that here again the senses seem not to give us the truth about the table itself, but only about the appearance of the table. ... Thus it becomes evident that the real table, if there is one, is not the same as what we immediately experience by sight or touch or hearing. The real table, if there is one, is not *immediately* known to us at all, but must be an inference from what is immediately known. Hence, two very difficult questions at once arise; namely, (1) Is there a real table at all? (2) If so, what sort of object can it be?

#### 2. An Example from Thompson Clarke (courtesy of Arata Hamawaki)

Imagine that early in the last century, a small plane crashes somewhere in the remote regions of the Sahara. Among the charred remains of the crash is a copy of Bertrand Russell’s *The Problems of Philosophy*. All of the pages of that book have been destroyed, except for a part that contains the words, “what we would like to know is whether there really are tables and chairs. Do tables and chairs really exist?” Some local nomads come upon the crash site, and are intrigued by the legible remains of Russell’s work. They somehow manage to find a translator who is able to render those words into their own tongue. They are puzzled. They ask him what it is about which those sentences speak. What in the world are “tables” and “chairs”? What are those words supposed to refer to? The translator offers a description of what they are reputed to be, but he confesses that having never set eyes on a table or a chair,

and not being in possession of any evidence that testifies to their existence, he himself is uncertain that they truly exist. He admits that they could well be like those mythical creatures that are mentioned in legends but aren't truly real. Upon hearing this, the nomads feel a sudden kinship with the author who penned the words whose meaning they have been trying to puzzle out. They think: he was asking the very question that we ourselves want to ask.

## II Two Quotations – One from Descartes, One from Kant

### 1. A quotation from Descartes

How often, asleep at night, am I convinced of just such familiar events -- that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire -- when in fact I am lying undressed in bed! Yet at the moment my eyes are certainly wide awake when I look at this piece of paper; I shake my head and it is not asleep; as I stretch out and feel my hand I do so deliberately, and I know what I am doing. All this would not happen with such distinctness to someone asleep. Indeed! As if I did not remember other occasions when I have been tricked by exactly similar thoughts while asleep! As I think about this more carefully, I see plainly that there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep.... Suppose then that I am dreaming, and that these particulars -- that my eyes are open, that I am moving my head and stretching out my hands -- are not true. Perhaps, indeed, I do not even have such hands or such a body at all. (Descartes, CSM, p. 13)

### 2. A quotation from Kant

The *a priori* conditions of a possible experience in general are at the same conditions of the possibility of objects of experience. Now I maintain that the categories ... are nothing but the conditions of thought in a possible experience.... [A]nd without such unity ... no thoroughgoing, universal, and therefore necessary, unity of consciousness would be met with in the manifold of perceptions. These perceptions would not then belong to any experience, consequently would be without an object, merely a blind play of representations, less even than a dream. (Kant, CPR, A112)

## III. Five Examples of Cartesian Skepticism

1. **Philosophy of perception.** How can I *know* things are as my senses present them as being? Is there *really* an external world? I am having an experience of a certain sort (say, that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire) but how can I know that things are as my experience presents them as being? I can have experiences that are indistinguishable from this one (in which I appear to be here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire), such as when I am dreaming, and yet things are not as they appear. The case under consideration is a *best case of knowledge*, and yet there still seems to be room for the question: How can I know that I am not, in fact, lying undressed in my bed

dreaming that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire? For there are no marks or features that allow one conclusively to distinguish waking from dreaming states. This leads to the following conclusion: if I don't know *this*, then how can I be said to know anything? Why should I ever trust the testimony of my senses? Should I ever endorse the appearances with which my senses present me? The gap the Cartesian skeptic regarding perception seeks to bridge is from his own mind to the outer world. The outer world is hidden behind the veil of perception. The paradox lies in our apparent inability to answer the following question: How can I penetrate the veil of sensory ideas and attain a view of what is really happening outside of my mind?

2. **The problem of other minds.** The person before me is acting for all the world as if he were in pain, but how can I *know* that he is pain. Is he pretending? Or is he *really* in pain? The case of someone convincingly pretending to be in pain can be indistinguishable from the case of someone actually being in pain. Thus I am not able to conclude that I know he is in pain. For there are no marks or features that conclusively distinguish a case of someone's pretending to be in a state from his being in that state. The conclusion here again takes the form: if I don't know *this*, how can I ever be said to know what someone else is feeling? The Cartesian problematic here is focused on the problem of how to underwrite the testimony of the human body. The gap the Cartesian seeks to bridge here is from the other's outer bodily movements to his inner states. The inner world of the other is hidden behind the veil of the body. This version of the Cartesian skeptic asks: How can I penetrate the screen of the other's body and attain a view of what is really happening inside the other himself?
3. **Philosophy of language.** The Cartesian version of this problem goes like this: How can I *know* that my interpretation of something (a text, an utterance, a sign-post) is correct? How can I be sure that this is what is *really* meant? I know how this sort of sign (say, a sign-post in the shape, say, of a pointing arrow) is usually to be interpreted, but how do I know that my interpretation in this case is the right interpretation? The physical appearance of the sign (text, utterance) could be indistinguishable across two different contexts of use, and yet the sign can have entirely different meanings in those two different contexts. Thus to understand the sign, I must first interpret it, and it is always possible that my interpretation is incorrect – that it applies to the one context, but not the other. Hence I cannot conclude that I *know* what the sign here means. But if I don't know *this*, how can I ever be said to know what something means? The gap that the Cartesian seeks to bridge here is between his understanding of the meaning of a sign and what the sign actually means. The actual meaning of the sign is never present to our view, but only our interpretation of it. This version of the Cartesian skeptic asks: How can I penetrate the penumbra of interpretation and attain a view of the meaning itself?
4. **The problem of intentional action.** The person before me appears to be raising his hand, but how can I *know* that *he* is *raising* his hand. The movement of his limbs is certainly indistinguishable from what it would be if he were raising his hand. But it is possible for a human hand to shoot up involuntarily, without the subject acting upon an intention to raise it. And

these two sorts of cases – the case of a mere bodily movement and the case of an intentional action – can be indistinguishable from one another. So how can I know that the other is *really* acting on an intention, i.e., that his movements are genuine expressions of agency, rather than the mere effects of biological (or psychological, or some other sort of) causes beyond his control. The gap that the Cartesian seeks to bridge here is between a merely bodily movement and the intention that lies beneath (or behind) it. This version of the Cartesian skeptic asks: How can I get beyond a set of bodily events (whose etiology is explicable in, say, purely physiological terms) to the set of intentions that gave rise to them?

5. **The philosophy of art.** I have accidentally turned over a can of paint, creating a pattern of splatter across the canvass that happened to be lying on the ground below the can. What a waste of perfectly good paint and a perfectly good canvass! But, downtown, in the *Museum of Modern Art*, there happens to be hanging on the wall a canvass indistinguishable from the one before me, but it bears the caption “*Splatter*, Artist: James Conant”. The object in the museum is a work of art. Thus the physical appearance of two objects can be indistinguishable from one another, when one of them is a mere accident and the other a work of art. So how can I *know* whether something is *really* a work of art? The gap that the Cartesian seeks to bridge here is between the mere physical appearance of the work of art and its status as an object of aesthetic value – one that invites and merits the sorts of interest and assessment appropriate to something that is a work of art and not just a thing. So this version of the Cartesian skeptic asks: How can I get beyond the objecthood of the work (whose characteristics are describable in purely physical terms) to the art?

#### IV. Five Examples of Kantian Skepticism

1. **Philosophy of perception.** The Kantian skeptic regarding perception is preoccupied by the following question: How can my senses so much as *present* things as being a certain way? How can my experience so much as be intelligibly *of* an external world? The Kantian problematic in philosophy of perception is focused on the problem how the senses must be so as to be able to furnish testimony. An outer object’s impinging on the senses would appear, as such, to be a mere transaction in nature, and, taken in and of itself, not to be the sort of item that is “about” anything, let alone the sort that ought to provide anyone with a reason for believing anything. What sort of unity must an episode of sensory experience possess in order to be able to present an appearance about which the question could arise “Shall I endorse it”? The Kantian paradox lies in its coming to seem a mystery how what impinges on my senses could so much as *appear* to be revelatory of the world. How am I so much as able to enjoy an experience that possesses a determinate world-directed content (say, that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire)? The gap the Kantian seeks to overcome is from sensory blindness to sensory consciousness -- from a form of sensibility upon which things merely causally impinge to one upon which things impress themselves as being thus and so.

2. **The problem of other minds.** This version of the Kantian skeptic is preoccupied by the following question: How can the human body so much as seem to *express* a mental state? A human body is, as such, nothing but so much bio-matter – i.e., a kind of substance whose possible states, taken in isolation, are without psychological purport. So how can any particular state of such a body itself possess the sort of significance we attribute to it when we take ourselves to see that someone is in pain, or happy, or angry. The Kantian paradox here lies in its coming to seem a mystery how an expanse of fleshy matter could so much as *appear* to be revelatory of an inner life. The Kantian problematic here is focused on the question: How does the human body even seem to furnish a *picture* of the human soul? The gap the Kantian seeks to overcome here is from an inexpressive physical entity to an animated field of human expression -- from a psychologically-neutral locus of bodily movements to the communicative body of a palpably suffering, desiring, pondering human being.
3. **Philosophy of language.** This version of the Kantian skeptic is preoccupied by the following question: How can a sequence of marks or noises so much as seem to *mean* something? Marks and noises are, as such, mere physical entities, devoid of any semantic content. How could such entities, in and of themselves, ever be the sort of things that *mean* something? The Kantian paradox here lies in its coming to seem a mystery how a mere sequence of dead signs could so much as *appear* to be alive with significance. The Kantian problematic here is focused on the question: How does a linguistic performance acquire the physiognomy of meaning? What sort of unity must a linguistic performance possess in order to appear to be the sort of thing about which the question could arise “Is this what it means”? The gap the Kantian seeks to overcome here is from meaningless sequences of marks and noises to determinate expressions of thought -- from a semantically neutral concatenation of scratches or sounds to a legible field of intelligible meanings.
4. **The problem of intentional action.** This version of the Kantian skeptic is preoccupied by the following question: How can a mere bodily movement, qua merely physiological event, ever be the *expression* of an intention? The bodily movement is an event in the natural world and, as such, the effect of purely physiological causes. How can there be any sort of internal relation between such a transaction in the natural world (which is, taken in itself, explicable in purely non-intentional terms) and something that supposedly happens in the mind (an event of an intrinsically intentional character)? The Kantian paradox here lies in its coming to seem a mystery how mere bodily movements could so much as possibly seem to be expressions of genuine full-blooded agency. The Kantian problematic here is focused on the question: How does the execution of a sequence of such movements acquire the physiognomy of an intention? What sort of unity must such a sequence possess in order to appear to be the sort of thing about which the question could arise “Is this what he intended to do”? The gap the Kantian seeks to overcome here is from the movements of muscles, tissues, and limbs to determinate expressions of human willing -- from an intentionally neutral

concatenation of jangling bodily appendages to a legible field of purposeful human action.

5. **The philosophy of art.** This version of the Kantian skeptic is preoccupied by the following question: How can a mere configuration of clay or bronze, or paint on canvass, or sequences of tones, ever so much as seem to be a structure of aesthetic significance and value? Are not such configurations of matter or sound, as such, mere physical shapes or noises which are, considered in and of themselves, devoid of aesthetic value? However fantastically improbable it might be, couldn't, in principle, any such configuration come into existence simply as the consequence of a bizarre sequence of physical events? And, as such, wouldn't such a mere effect of natural causes, absent some further intervening moment of human activity (which aspired to confer significance upon the configuration in question), remain something less than a work of art? How can such mere configurations of matter and sound ever be the sorts of thing that are properly supposed to possess the features we take ourselves genuinely to be able to discover in works of art? The Kantian paradox here lies in its coming to seem a mystery how a mere sequence of shapes and sounds could so much as *appear* to be alive with aesthetic significance. The Kantian problematic here is focused on the question: How does an object acquire the physiognomy of aesthetic depth? What sort of unity must it possess in order to appear to be the sort of object about which the question could arise "Is this an original work or merely derivative?", "Does it move me (or speak to me or provoke me) or just leave me cold (or chagrined, or disgusted)?", or even just "Does this object merit this sort of critical interest and attention"? The gap the Kantian seeks to overcome here is from aesthetically inert constellations of matter and sound to objects that are properly taken to invite and support forms of aesthetic appreciation and criticism -- from artistically neutral chunks of stuff or noise to delightful or provocative exemplars of beauty and sublimity.

## V. Cartesian and Kantian Features

### *Nine Characteristic Features of Cartesian Skepticism*

- (1) The Cartesian investigation begins with and turns on the exploration of a certain sort of example -- *a best case of knowledge*.
- (2) Such a case is shown to be vulnerable to *doubt*.
- (3) The discovery is that our conclusion *generalizes* (that we can move from a conclusion about this particular candidate item of knowledge to a general conclusion about all such items).

- (4) The investigation thereby issues in a *discovery*.
- (5) The investigation ends in a mood of *disappointment*.
- (6) The disappointment is born of the impossibility of showing how what we had taken to be possible could be *actual*.
- (7) It looks as if there is something *we cannot do*.
- (8) Our inability is the consequence of the existence of a *Cartesian gap*.
- (9) The *practical instability* of the Cartesian problematic.

### *Nine Characteristic Features of Kantian Skepticism*

- (1) It is constitutive of the sort of investigation into knowledge that it is that it is characterized by a peculiar sort of *indifference to the character of the object* it takes up as an example.
- (2) It does not issue in a doubt, but a *boggle*.
- (3) The paradox is not the result of moving from a conclusion about a particular object to a general conclusion about all objects of experience, but rather a result of the inability to see how there could so much as be an experience that purports to be *of a particular*.
- (4) Its investigation climaxes not in a sense of discovery, but one of *mystery*.
- (5) This investigation ends in a mood not of disappointment, but of *despair*.
- (6) The despair is born not of the impossibility of showing how what we take to be possible could be actual, but of showing how what we take to be actual could be *possible*.
- (7) It no longer looks as if there is something we cannot do, now it looks as if there is *nothing to do* (not even dream) where we had previously thought there was something to do.

- (8) The apparent disintegration of this something into a nothing is the consequence of a *Kantian gap*.
- (9) A skeptical outcome to the Kantian problematic is not merely practically unstable, but *theoretically unstable qua surmise*.

## VI. Two Examples of “The Given”

### 1. Price’s Tomato

When I see a tomato there is much that I can doubt. I can doubt whether it is a tomato that I am seeing, and not a cleverly painted piece of wax. I can doubt whether there is any material thing there at all. Perhaps what I took for a tomato was really a reflection; perhaps I am even the victim of some hallucination. One thing however I cannot doubt: that there exists a red patch of a round and somewhat bulgy shape, standing out from a background of other colour-patches, and having a certain visual depth, and that this whole field of colour is directly present to my consciousness. What the red patch is, whether a substance, or as a state of a substance, or an event, whether it is physical or psychical or neither, are questions that we may doubt about. But that something is red and round then and there I cannot doubt. Whether the something persists even for a moment before and after it is present to my consciousness, whether other minds can be conscious of it as well as I, may be doubted. But that it now *exists*, and that *I* am conscious of it – by me at least who am conscious of it this cannot possibly be doubted. And when I say that it is ‘directly’ present to my consciousness, I mean that my conscious of it is not reached by inference, nor by any other intellectual process ... nor by any passage from sign to significate.... This peculiar and ultimate manner of being present to consciousness is called *being given*, and that which is thus present is called a *datum*. (H.H. Price, *Perception*, p. 1)

### 2. Lewis’s Fountain Pen

At the moment, I have a fountain pen in my hand. When I so describe this item of my present experience, I make use of terms whose meaning I have learned. Correlatively I abstract this item from the total field of my present consciousness and relate it to what is not just now present in ways which I have learned and which reflect modes of action I have acquired. It might happen that I remember my first experience of such a thing. If so, I should find that this sort of presentation did not then mean “fountain pen” to me. I bring to the present moment something which I did not then bring; a relation of this to other actual and possible experiences, and a classification of what is here presented with things which I did not then include in the same group. This



present classification depends on that learned relation of this experience to other possible experience and to my action, which the shape, size, etc. of this object was not then a sign of. A savage in New Guinea lacking certain interests and habits of action which are mine, would not so classify it.... In whatever terms I describe this item of my experience, I shall not convey it merely as given, but shall supplement this by a meaning which has to do with relations, and particularly with relation to other experiences which I regard as possible but which are not just now actual.... The infant may see it much as I do, but still it will mean him none of these things I have described it as being, but merely “plaything” or “smooth biteable”. But for any mind whatever, it will be more than what is merely given if it be noted at all. (C. I. Lewis, *Mind and the World Order*, p. 52)

## **VI. A Case of a Philosophical Verbal Twin: Putnam and McDowell**

### **1. Putnam’s statement of his agreement with McDowell**

[Contrary to skepticism,] there is a way to do justice to our sense that knowledge claims are responsible to reality without recoiling into metaphysical fantasy. [...] In McDowell’s view the key assumption responsible for the disaster is the idea that there has to be an interface between our cognitive powers and the external world – or, to put the same point differently, the idea that our cognitive powers cannot reach all the way to the objects themselves. (Putnam, TFC, pp. 4, 10)

### **2. What Putnam misses in McDowell**

It is true that modern philosophy is pervaded by apparent problems about knowledge in particular. But I think it is helpful to see those apparent problems as more or less inept expressions of a deeper anxiety—an inchoately felt threat that a way of thinking we find ourselves falling into leave minds simply out of touch with the rest of reality, not just questionably capable of getting to know about it. A problem about crediting with knowledge is just one shape, and not the most fundamental, in which that anxiety can make itself felt. (McDowell, M & W, p. xiv)