

Symposium on Penelope Maddy's 'What Do Philosophers Do'?



Introductory Overview

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Abstract

This piece gives an overview of my book, *What Do Philosophers Do? Skepticism and the Practice of Philosophy*.

Keywords

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This book aims to do two things at once. One of those things is what you might call comparative meta-philosophy, an examination of the strengths and weaknesses of a range of different approaches to philosophical problems. But it's not really possible to evaluate a meta-philosophy without seeing how it plays out for a particular philosophical undertaking, and for that purpose, I've chosen the venerable problem of our knowledge of the external world.

The book sets out to do these two things in a semi-popular way. My thought was that the book should be accessible to any inquiring mind willing to don a thinking cap—that is, without prerequisites or specialized vocabulary, but with serious philosophical intent. This orientation gave me license to start farther

back than most contemporary writing on skepticism, which typically begins from some carefully crafted version of the closure argument. Practiced professionals may easily feel the force of these blunt formulations, but the skeptical worries most likely to engage and trouble our philosophically-innocent but inquiring mind seem to me to be the original sources: the Dream Argument and the Argument from Illusion.

As to meta-philosophy, for some time now, I've been describing a particularly simple form of naturalism that I call 'second philosophy', but for this book, given the audience, I thought best to begin with common sense, with a point of view akin to that advocated by Thomas Reid, G.E. Moore, and of course J.L. Austin, whose "Plain Man" often surfaces to brusquely state the obvious in the face of the philosopher's sophisticated convolutions. If this Plain Man develops some more discerning empirical methods—generalization, experimentation, theory formation and confirmation—he becomes a second philosopher, whose title, for purposes of parallelism in this book, I changed to the Plain Inquirer. The book begins, then, meta-philosophically speaking, from the perspective of these two figures.

Imagine, then, the Plain Man and the Plain Inquirer confronted with the challenge of the Dream Argument: you claim to see a chair before you, as you look at it, well-rested, in good light, etc., but how do you know you aren't just dreaming that you see it when there's actually no chair in your vicinity? The Plain Man might well respond that of course he's not asleep, don't be daft, while the Plain Inquirer replies in more detail and in more measured tones with an account of how the visual system has been shown to be reliable in conditions of the kind here in force, that dreamed experience has certain characteristics that aren't currently present, and so on. But the skeptic isn't interested in these observations from ordinary experience or from vision science or from the neurophysiology of dreaming; he's talking about a kind of dreaming that's phenomenologically indistinguishable from waking life, he's imagining that this special kind of dreaming extends to all the Plain Man's common sense and all the Plain Inquirer's scientific discoveries. His challenge is: how do you know the chair you claim to see, as well as the various purported facts you call on to defend that claim, aren't all just part of an all-encompassing extraordinary dream?

Here the Plain Man may throw up his hands in exasperation, but the Plain Inquirer realizes that the challenge from extraordinary dreaming—along with the Evil Demon, the Brain in the Vat, and so on—boils down to the challenge that she defend her belief in that chair without appealing to any of her tried and true methods of defending beliefs. This she cannot do, but—and this is the

key point—she doesn't take her inability to provide this extraordinary kind of evidence to undercut the ordinary evidence she has in abundance. She recognizes with equanimity both that ordinary dreaming is an unreliable source of beliefs and that extraordinary dreaming can't be refuted. Perhaps this helps explain the intuitive force of the Dream Argument: at the beginning, we readily agree that ordinary dreaming must be ruled out; at the end, we're convinced that the extraordinary dreaming cannot be; we fail to notice the unwitting slide from one to the other along the way.

So far, the only meta-philosophies involved have been those of Austin's common-sensical Plain Man and my second-philosophical Plain Inquirer, but Austin also employed other methods, notably Ordinary Language Philosophizing. In his landmark book on skepticism, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*, Professor Stroud describes how this method can be deployed against the claim that the requirement to rule out extraordinary dreaming is actually part of our everyday concept of knowledge—Austin's observations about the actual use of the word 'know' clearly show that this requirement isn't respected in practice—but Stroud proposes that this is only because limited time and resources prompt us to cut corners. Now I read Austin as denying that there is an underlying concept of knowledge distinct from the usage of 'know', for reasons in near-perfect lockstep with Quine's rejection of universals in "On What There Is," though several years earlier (in 1939 and 1940 vs. 1948). But there remains the Gricean possibility that our reluctance to insist that extraordinary dreaming be ruled out reflects conversational norms, not our true standards; it would be rude, but not incorrect, to insist that absolutely no corners be cut. The trouble is that it's hard for the Plain Man or the Plain Inquirer to see—in the case of an observer with normal vision, with a chair in front of her in good light, etc., etc.—it's hard for them to see what corners have actually been cut, what more they could be expected to do.

On the Argument from Illusion, then, Austin, Thomas Reid, and many others have observed that though the straight stick looks bent when partly submerged, it doesn't follow that something or other else really is bent, in other words, the inference from the facts of perceptual relativity, illusion, and hallucination to the conclusion that we only perceive ideas or percepts or sense data is fallacious. Oddly enough, though, this straightforward observation doesn't seem to interrupt the immediate, intuitive force of the Argument for many people. The relevant meta-philosophical method in a case like this isn't any form of direct persuasion, but therapeutic treatment, and here again we find Austin, this time pointing to the "seductive verbal fallacies" and the epistemologist's misguided quest for incorrigible, foundational evidence as factors

that contribute to the Argument's undeserved persuasive power. I'll talk later about another possible source for this persistent distortion (in connection with Professor Stroud's remarks).

Reid is sometimes accused of thinking that undercutting the Argument from Illusion and the theory of ideas is enough to refute skepticism, but in fact he realized full well that the skeptical challenge can be lodged against direct perceptual beliefs that aren't inferred from sense data. Indeed if the skeptic challenges not just perception, but all our faculties—reason, memory, introspection—then Reid allows this thorough-going skeptic must be left to “enjoy his skepticism.” Reid's quarrel is with the semi-skeptic, who takes introspection, memory, and reason all for granted, but insists that perception be defended on their terms. A case for this demand might be launched from the notion that introspection, for example, is infallible or incorrigible, but Reid argues persuasively that it isn't, followed in recent times by Austin.

So Reid and the Plain Inquirer happily admit that they can't rule out extraordinary dreaming, that they can't defend the Plain Man's belief in his chair without using any of their tried and true methods for defending beliefs, but neither Reid nor the Plain Inquirer take this lack of extraordinary evidence to undercut the ordinary evidence that the Plain Man and the rest of us all enjoy. Granting that neither the Dream Argument nor the Argument from Illusion successfully supports the skeptic here, why does the hypothesis of extraordinary dreaming, the challenge to defend our beliefs ‘from scratch’, strike so many philosophers as threatening to our everyday beliefs?

At this point, I turn again to therapy, this time not Austinian, but Wittgensteinian. Following the pattern of a particular multiple-voices reading of the famous rule-following argument, I suggest that Wittgenstein rejects both (his version of) Moore's anti-skepticism and the currently much-discussed hinge epistemology, accusing them both of harboring an implicit presupposition, namely that legitimate evidence, truly confirming evidence, must support the claim for which it's evidence no matter how bizarre the circumstances, without relying on the contingent nature of our perceptual mechanisms, or the actual makeup of the world we inhabit, or anything else—that is, any legitimate evidence must be extraordinary. But this presupposition, Wittgenstein tells us, is a mistake, analogous to the mistake of demanding the pristine sort of meaning that leads to rule-following skepticism. In both cases, we're blinded by philosophical prejudice to the ordinary methods that work for us in our world.

So that's the story of the Plain Inquirer's response to skepticism. Along the way, in addition to her roughly scientific or naturalistic approach, she's also helped herself to the methods of common-sense philosophy (following Austin, Moore, and Reid), ordinary language philosophy (Austin again), and

therapeutic philosophy (Austin and Wittgenstein). Conceptual analysis, too, has a place in her toolbox, if not quite the place it enjoys with philosophers more sympathetic to 'concepts'. All this is supposed to give the general reader a sense of what philosophers do, along with some not-so-subtle editorializing about what they *should* do.