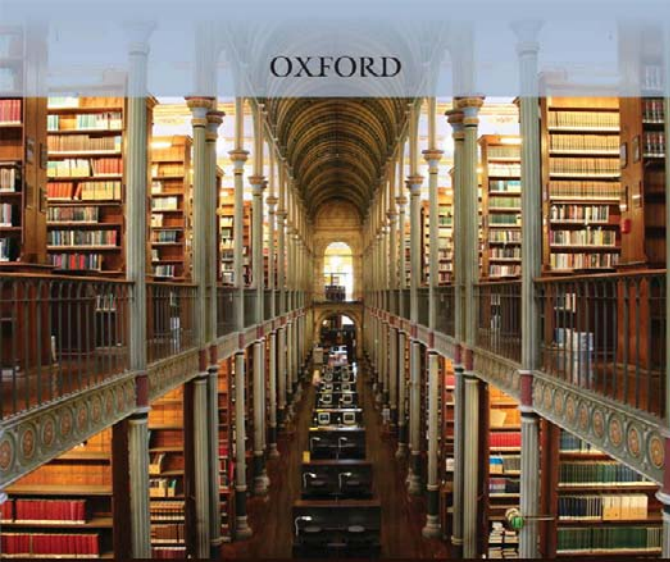


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Barry Stroud

The Significance of
Philosophical Scepticism

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The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism

Barry Stroud

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For Martha

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Preface

Philosophical scepticism goes back to antiquity, and in writing of it as I do in this book I am not doing justice to that tradition. For the followers of Pyrrho of Elis, for example, a life of contentment or tranquillity was to be the reward for giving oneself up to ‘appearances’ and adopting no beliefs at all as to how things are. Suspending judgement was a way of freeing oneself from the anxieties and disturbances inevitably involved in seeking the truth and then encountering conflict among the things one feels forced to believe. Scepticism as a way of life is not my subject here. But some of the steps by which suspension of judgement was to have been achieved, and the difficulty of achieving it on *all* questions as to how things are, lie closer to my theme. The contrast implicit in sceptical practice between ‘appearances’ and ‘the way things are’ is also perhaps one version of an elusive distinction I examine from several different angles in what follows. My concerns are to that extent continuous with those of ancient scepticism, but I do not discuss such historical questions here. That is a subject I wish I knew more about.

In modern, and especially recent, times scepticism in philosophy has come to be understood as the view that we know nothing, or that nothing is certain, or that everything is open to doubt. That is a thesis or doctrine about the human condition, not itself a way of life. It is thought to rest on many of the same considerations ancient sceptics might have invoked in freeing themselves from their opinions or opposing the doctrines of others, but as a philosophical thesis it does not obviously lead to any one way of life rather than another, let alone to tranquillity or human happiness. One issue I raise in this book is just what relation philosophical scepticism does bear to the familiar concerns of everyday life.

As an account of human knowledge, scepticism in this modern form need not apply to everything we believe.

Knowledge or reliable belief might be possible about some things or in some areas and not others. Thus we could perhaps endorse scepticism about the claims of morality or religion without for the same reasons having to abandon mathematics or medicine or the science of nature.

In this book I examine the sceptical philosophical view that we can know nothing about the physical world around us. That thesis is found to be the only answer to a problem about how knowledge of the world is possible. Most philosophical theories of knowledge in modern times have taken a stand on that problem, very few of them an explicitly sceptical stand. The extent to which any of those theories could possibly be correct is therefore also at the centre of my interest. But it is not merely a question of finding the best theory of knowledge. By examining philosophical scepticism about the external world I hope to bring into question our very understanding of what a philosophical theory of knowledge is supposed to be. That is something that I believe is not as well understood as the apparently endless proliferation of more and more such 'theories' might lead one to suppose. It is time to stop and ask what *any* philosophical theory of knowledge is supposed to do.

I am concerned, then, with the *significance* of philosophical scepticism, and in several different ways. Something can be said to be significant as opposed to being insignificant or unimportant, and I want to illustrate the importance of scepticism for the philosophical study of knowledge. Not everyone would appear to agree; scepticism in philosophy has been found uninteresting, perhaps even a waste of time, in recent years. The attempt to meet, or even to understand, the sceptical challenge to our knowledge of the world is regarded in some circles as an idle academic exercise, a wilful refusal to abandon outmoded forms of thinking in this new post-Cartesian age. When this attitude is not based on ignorance or a philistine impatience with abstract thought it often rests on the belief that we already understand quite well just how and why traditional philosophical scepticism goes wrong. One aim of this book is to suggest that that comfortable belief is not true.

I think many philosophers who show little interest in

scepticism are in fact committed to it by their own theories of knowledge, and that others who would simply avoid the issue cannot give a satisfactory explanation of how it is to be overcome. I do not mean to legislate intellectual taste. I do not suggest that everyone should be interested in scepticism, or even that all philosophers should be interested in understanding how human knowledge is possible. But I do think that those who ponder this latter question at all are wrong to suppose they can now be indifferent to the workings of philosophical scepticism. There are those on the other hand who take no interest in scepticism because they think it is so obviously true as not to bear repeating. I find that reaction equally unsatisfactory, although more perceptive than its opposite, for reasons I hope will emerge.

Something can also be said to be significant as opposed to being meaningless or incoherent or unintelligible, and that is another dimension of my interest in the significance of philosophical scepticism. It could be that the sceptical thesis that we know nothing about the world around us turns out on investigation not to mean what it seems to mean, or perhaps not to mean anything at all. The question of what it does mean, if anything, runs throughout this book, and not only in Chapter Five where the issue of meaninglessness is discussed directly. If the sceptical thesis does turn out to be incoherent, all those who are bored either by its obvious falsity or by its obvious truth must be mistaken. They will not really understand why it is a non-issue even if it is.

We can also speak of the significance of something in the sense of what it signifies or what it indicates or what it shows. In that way too, perhaps above all, I am interested in the significance of philosophical scepticism. Even if the thesis means nothing, or not what it seems to mean, can the study of scepticism about the world around us nevertheless reveal something deep or important about human knowledge or human nature or the urge to understand them philosophically? I am pretty sure that the answer is 'Yes', but I do not get as far as I would like towards showing why that is so. Nor do I ever manage to state precisely what the lesson or moral of a study of philosophical scepticism might be. Aside from the usual contingencies of limited space and

limited insight and understanding, there might be good, even philosophical, reasons for my failure to do that. Perhaps an unambiguous moral can never be stated. If so, that fact itself would be something worth explaining. I try to take some steps in that direction.

This book is written in the belief that the study of philosophical problems can itself be philosophically illuminating. Of course no one would deny the need for a clear understanding of the problem at hand if there is to be real intellectual progress. But I do not just mean that solving or answering philosophical questions can be illuminating. Of course it could be, if you happened to get the right answer and knew that you had, or even if you failed and knew that you had failed, and perhaps even had some idea why. I mean that the study of the very nature of a philosophical problem can be an illuminating activity quite independently of whether it ever leads to a better answer.

The attempt to understand what I am calling the nature of a philosophical problem can be expected to illuminate not only the problem itself, but also the very ‘phenomenon’—morality, religion, knowledge, action, or whatever it might be—out of which the philosophical problem arises. It is surprising to me how few people writing philosophy in this day and age actually concentrate on the problems themselves and where they come from. There seems to be widespread confidence about what the problems are, what sort of thing a successful philosophical doctrine or theory would be, and what it would take to give us the kind of understanding philosophy can give us of the phenomena it has traditionally been concerned with. I do not share that confidence. I think that whatever we seek in philosophy, or whatever leads us to ask philosophical questions at all, must be something pretty deep in human nature, and that what leads us to ask just the questions we do in the particular ways we now ask them must be something pretty deep in our tradition. Studying the sources of philosophical problems as they now present themselves to us can therefore perhaps be expected to yield some degree of understanding, illumination, satisfaction, or whatever it is we seek in philosophy, even if we never arrive at something we can regard as a solution to a philosophical

problem. In fact the two might even work against each other; adopting something we take to be an acceptable answer to a philosophical problem might be just what prevents us from learning the lesson that a deeper understanding of the source of the problem could reveal.

In any case the idea that the source of philosophical problems is not well understood and might promise something of philosophical interest is a hypothesis worth putting to the test. I hope I give some reasons for thinking it plausible in the case of one philosophical problem, but nothing I say is carried far enough to support a final verdict even in that single case. Perhaps a final verdict is too much to aspire to when it is a question of how much illumination can be gained from a certain kind of investigation. One of the attractions, and one of the perils, of the kind of task I recommend is that there is no telling in advance where it might lead or what it might yield. For that reason alone I hope the kind of investigation I try to encourage here will be pursued further. But the pages that follow should not be expected to culminate in a set of doctrines or conclusions about philosophical scepticism or about the problem to which it is an answer. At best they can take us some way towards understanding and appreciating its significance.

I expound and examine the writings of several particular philosophers in what follows, and I hope what I have to say about them can be seen to apply more widely than to their views alone. In fact I think each of the positions I discuss represents one or another of the several types of theory or approach now current in epistemology, even if I do not always discuss the latest instance of the type. I have been strongly tempted, and in some cases actually convinced, by each of them at one time or another. Dissatisfaction with each of them in turn no doubt contributed to my present preoccupation with the nature or point—or even the possibility—of a philosophical theory of knowledge as such. Again I offer nothing definitive about what a philosophical theory is. I exhibit some specimens and examine them in the light of the problem of our knowledge of the external world. Perhaps a certain pattern can eventually be discerned.

Over the years that I have been working, lecturing, and writing on these topics I have enjoyed the support of the Humanities Research Fellowships of the University of California, Berkeley, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. I am extremely grateful to each. Without them this book would not exist.

I have presented versions of this or related material in a great many universities and colleges in eight countries. The variety of response and sympathetic criticism I received has had good effects on the pages that follow, even if I myself can no longer identify them and individually thank those responsible. I think the idea of a book-length study of scepticism along present lines first occurred to me for a series of talks I gave in a seminar in Berkeley in the spring of 1977. There was another in the winter of 1983 in which the penultimate draft of this book was given close scrutiny by a number of shrewd Berkeley graduate students. I would like to thank both groups, and several more-or-less captive lecture-course audiences in Berkeley as well, for their help. Without the opportunity to develop my material before such perceptive and outspoken students this project would never have got off the ground.

Everything here is newly written, but in places it overlaps, sometimes closely, with papers of mine published earlier. 'The Significance of Scepticism', written in 1977 for a conference in Bielefeld on Transcendental Arguments and the Conceptual Foundations of Science, gives a rough sketch of the general line I try to develop here in more detail. It appears in the proceedings of the conference, *Transcendental Arguments and Science*, edited by P. Bieri, R. P. Horstmann, and L. Krüger (Reidel, Dordrecht, 1981). The main ideas in my interpretation of Kant in Chapter Four can be found in 'Kant and Skepticism', my contribution to *The Skeptical Tradition*, edited by M. F. Burnyeat (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1983). Chapter Six is a revised and expanded version of 'The Significance of Naturalized Epistemology', which appeared in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy, Volume Six: The Foundations of Analytic Philosophy*, edited by P. A. French, T. E. Uehling, Jr., H. K. Wettstein (University

of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1981). Part of Chapter Seven is drawn from my contribution to an American Philosophical Association symposium, 'Reasonable Claims: Cavell and the Tradition', published in *The Journal of Philosophy*, 1980. I would like to thank the editors and publishers involved for permission to publish the present version.

It is by now quite impossible for me to list every friend, acquaintance, colleague, and critic who has influenced this work. I can therefore offer only rather sweeping thanks to all. In recent years I know I have profited from discussions with Rogers Albritton, Myles Burnyeat, Stanley Cavell, Donald Davidson, Burton Dreben, Linda Foy, Gil Harman, Lorenz Krüger, Thomas Nagel, Mark Platts, W. V. Quine, Tim Scanlon, Sam Scheffler, and Judith Thomson. Janet Broughton has been especially helpful in reading and commenting on parts of the manuscript at different stages of its composition and always giving me good advice. Michael Frede is a constant stimulus and support from whom I always learn more than I can make use of.

In a quite special relation to this book stands my friend and colleague Thompson Clarke. It is simply impossible for me fully to identify and acknowledge my debt to him over the years. Much of the substance of Chapter One has been taken for granted as common ground between us for a long time. I first presented some of the ideas of Chapter Two in a joint seminar with him in the late 1960s in response to writings of his which I saw at the time as conceding too much to Austin despite the effort to come to terms with linguistic philosophy in support of traditional epistemology. It is something we have continued to discuss in one form or another ever since. The basic conception of G. E. Moore in Chapter Three, aside from details of application, can be found in his 'The Legacy of Skepticism'. Our extended discussion of issues raised in that paper eventually gave me a grip on the distinction between what he calls 'the plain' and 'the philosophical' which in one form or another runs throughout the book. It then helped me to understand Kant's notion of the 'transcendental' as I try to explain it in Chapter Four. Verificationism gave me another, perhaps clearer, instance of the same kind of distinction, and I came to see

that some of the dissatisfactions with it I express in Chapter Five were probably behind my ‘Transcendental Arguments’ of 1968. Chapter Six began in discussions of Quine in joint classes Clarke and I held in the late 1970s, and I developed in my own way ideas about the ‘internal’ and the ‘external’ that I think we had both been pursuing. Chapter Seven contains part of my response to ‘The Legacy of Skepticism’ at an American Philosophical Association meeting in 1972 and part of an interpretation of Stanley Cavell, both of which we discussed together many times.

But a list of particular chapters or topics in which his effect on this book can be identified would never be enough; I have been too close to his work over the last twenty years to measure what I have got from him in that way. By now there have undoubtedly been influences in both directions, but the effects of our association are much more pervasive and more unspecifiable in my case than in his. It is no exaggeration at all to say that my whole way of thinking about philosophy, and not just about traditional epistemology, has been affected by him in untold ways, and I am happy to have the chance to acknowledge it here. He would not deal with the questions I investigate in the way I do, but I would not proceed as I do had it not been for him. I would be pleased if what I have presented here of our shared conception of the subject helps make his own quite special contributions to these questions more available to the philosophical world.

Beyond these philosophical debts, I would like finally to say a word of gratitude to Venice, La Serenissima herself, where the book was first written. Probably no place on earth is more conducive to contemplating the problem of the reality of the external world, and without the undeniably real warmth and friendliness of the people I came to know there I might have returned to *terraferma* with a case rather than a treatment of scepticism.

BS

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I The Problem of the External World

Since at least the time of Descartes in the seventeenth century there has been a philosophical problem about our knowledge of the world around us.¹ Put most simply, the problem is to show how we can have any knowledge of the world at all. The conclusion that we cannot, that no one knows anything about the world around us, is what I call ‘scepticism about the external world’, so we could also say that the problem is to show how or why scepticism about the external world is not correct. My aim is not to solve the problem but to understand it. I believe the problem has no solution; or rather that the only answer to the question as it is meant to be understood is that we can know nothing about the world around us. But how is the question meant to be understood? It can be expressed in a few English words familiar to all of us, but I hope to show that an understanding of the special philosophical character of the question, and of the inevitability of an unsatisfactory answer to it, cannot be guaranteed by our understanding of those words alone. To see how the problem is meant to be understood we must therefore examine what is perhaps best described as its source—how the problem arises and how it acquires that special character that makes an unsatisfactory negative answer inevitable. We must try to understand the *philosophical* problem of our knowledge of the external world.

The problem arose for Descartes in the course of reflecting on everything he knows. He reached a point in his life at which he tried to sit back and reflect on everything he had ever been taught or told, everything he had learned or discovered or believed since he was old enough to know or

¹ It has been argued that the problem in the completely general form in which I discuss it here is new in Descartes, and that nothing exactly similar appears in philosophy before that time. See M. F. Burnyeat, ‘Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed’, *The Philosophical Review*, 1982.

believe anything.² We might say that he was reflecting on his knowledge, but putting it that way could suggest that what he was directing his attention to was indeed knowledge, and whether it was knowledge or not is precisely what he wanted to determine. 'Among all the things I believe or take to be true, what amounts to knowledge and what does not?'; that is the question Descartes asks himself. It is obviously a very general question, since it asks about everything he believes or takes to be true, but in other respects it sounds just like the sort of question we are perfectly familiar with in everyday life and often know how to answer.

For example, I have come to accept over the years a great many things about the common cold. I have always been told that one can catch cold by getting wet feet, or from sitting in a draught, or from not drying one's hair before going outdoors in cold weather. I have also learned that the common cold is the effect of a virus transmitted by an already infected person. And I also believe that one is more vulnerable to colds when over-tired, under stress, or otherwise in less than the best of health. Some of these beliefs seem to me on reflection to be inconsistent with some others; I see that it is very unlikely that all of them could be true. Perhaps they could be, but I acknowledge that there is much I do not understand. If I sit back and try to think about all my 'knowledge' of the common cold, then, I might easily come to wonder how much of it really amounts to knowledge and how much does not. What do I really know about the common cold? If I were sufficiently interested in pursuing the matter it would be natural to look into the source of my beliefs. Has there ever been any good reason for thinking that colds are even correlated with wet hair in cold weather, for example, or with sitting in a draught? Are the people from whom I learned such things likely to have believed them for good reasons? Are those beliefs just old wives' tales, or are they really true, and perhaps even known to be true by some people? These are questions I might ask myself, and I have at least a general idea of how to go about answering them.

² See the beginning of the first of his *Meditations on First Philosophy* in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, edited and translated by E. S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (2 vols., New York, 1955), vol. I, p. 145. (Hereafter cited as HR.)

Apart from my impression of the implausibility of all my beliefs about the common cold being true together, I have not mentioned any other reason for being interested in investigating the state of my knowledge on that subject. But for the moment that does not seem to affect the intelligibility or the feasibility of the reflective project. There is nothing mysterious about it. It is the sort of task we can be led to undertake for a number of reasons, and often very good reasons, in so far as we have very good reasons for preferring knowledge and firm belief to guesswork or wishful thinking or simply taking things for granted.

Reflection on or investigation of our putative knowledge need not always extend to a wide area of interest. It might be important to ask whether some quite specific and particular thing I believe or have been taking for granted is really something I know. As a member of a jury I might find that I have been ruling out one suspect in my mind because he was a thousand miles away, in Cleveland, at the time of the crime. But I might then begin to ask myself whether that is really something that I know. I would reflect on the source of my belief, but reflection in this case need not involve a general scrutiny of everything I take myself to know about the case. Re-examining the man's alibi and the credentials of its supporting witnesses might be enough to satisfy me. Indeed I might find that its reliability on those counts is precisely what I had been going on all along.

In pointing out that we are perfectly familiar with the idea of investigating or reviewing our knowledge on some particular matter or in some general area I do not mean to suggest that it is always easy to settle the question. Depending on the nature of the case, it might be very difficult, perhaps even impossible at the time, to reach a firm conclusion. For example, it would probably be very difficult if not impossible for me to trace and assess the origins of many of those things I believe about the common cold. But it is equally true that sometimes it is not impossible or even especially difficult to answer the question. We do sometimes discover that we do not really know what we previously thought we knew. I might find that what I had previously

believed is not even true—that sitting in draughts is not even correlated with catching a cold, for example. Or I might find that there is not or perhaps never was any good reason to believe what I believed—that the man's alibi was concocted and then falsely testified to by his friends. I could reasonably conclude in each case that I, and everyone else for that matter, never did know what I had previously thought I knew. We are all familiar with the ordinary activity of reviewing our knowledge, and with the experience of reaching a positive verdict in some cases and a negative verdict in others.

Descartes's own interest in what he knows and how he knows it is part of his search for what he calls a general method for 'rightly conducting reason and seeking truth in the sciences'.³ He wants a method of inquiry that he can be assured in advance will lead only to the truth if properly followed. I think we do not need to endorse the wisdom of that search or the feasibility of that programme in order to try to go along with Descartes in his general assessment of the position he is in with respect to the things he believes. He comes to find his putative knowledge wanting in certain general respects, and it is in the course of that original negative assessment that the problem I am interested in arises. I call the assessment 'negative' because by the end of his *First Meditation* Descartes finds that he has no good reason to believe anything about the world around him and therefore that he can know nothing of the external world.

How is that assessment conducted, and how closely does it parallel the familiar kind of review of our knowledge that we all know how to conduct in everyday life? The question in one form or another will be with us for the rest of this book. It is the question of what exactly the problem of our knowledge of the external world amounts to, and how it arises with its special philosophical character. The source of the problem is to be found somewhere within or behind the kind of thinking Descartes engages in.

One way Descartes's question about his knowledge differs from the everyday examples I considered is in being

³ See his *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting Reason and Seeking Truth in the Sciences* in HR, pp. 81 ff.

concerned with *everything* he believes or takes to be true. How does one go about assessing all of one's knowledge all at once? I was able to list a few of the things I believe about the common cold and then to ask about each of them whether I really know it, and if so how. But although I can certainly list a number of the things I believe, and I would assent to many more of them as soon as they were put to me, there obviously is no hope of assessing everything I believe in this piecemeal way. For one thing, it probably makes no sense, strictly speaking, to talk of the number of things one believes. If I am asked whether it is one of my beliefs that I went to see a film last night I can truly answer 'Yes'. If I were asked whether it is one of my beliefs that I went to the movies last night I would give the same answer. Have I thereby identified two, or only one, of my beliefs? How is that question ever to be settled? If we say that I identified only one of my beliefs, it would seem that I must also be said to hold the further belief that going to see a film and going to the movies are one and the same thing. So we would have more than one belief after all. The prospects of arriving even at a principle for counting beliefs, let alone at an actual number of them, seem dim.

Even if it did make sense to count the things we believe it is pretty clear that the number would be indefinitely large and so an assessment of our beliefs one by one could never be completed anyway. This is easily seen by considering only some of the simplest things one knows, for example in arithmetic. One thing I know is that one plus one equals two. Another thing I know is that one plus two is three, and another, that one plus three is four. Obviously there could be no end to the task of assessing my knowledge if I had to investigate separately the source of each one of my beliefs in that series. And even if I succeeded I would only have assessed the things I know about the addition of the number one to a given number; I would still have to do the same for the addition of two, and then the addition of three, and so on. And even that would exhaust only my beliefs about addition; all my other mathematical beliefs, not to mention all the rest of my knowledge, would remain so far unexamined. Obviously the job cannot be done piecemeal, one by one.

Some method must be found for assessing large classes of beliefs all at once.

One way to do this would be to look for common sources or channels or bases of our beliefs, and then to examine the reliability of those sources or bases, just as I examined the source or basis of my belief that the suspect was in Cleveland. Descartes describes such a search as a search for ‘principles’ of human knowledge, ‘principles’ whose general credentials he can then investigate (HR, 145). If some ‘principles’ are found to be involved in all or even most of our knowledge, an assessment of the reliability of those ‘principles’ could be an assessment of all or most of our knowledge. If I found good reason to doubt the reliability of the suspect's alibi, for example, and that was all I had to go on in my belief that he was in Cleveland, then what I earlier took to be my knowledge that he was in Cleveland would have been found wanting or called into question. Its source or basis would have been undermined. Similarly, if one of the ‘principles’ or bases on which all my knowledge of the world depends were found to be unreliable, my knowledge of the world would to that extent have been found wanting or called into question as well.

Are there any important ‘principles’ of human knowledge in Descartes's sense? It takes very little reflection on the human organism to convince us of the importance of the senses—sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. Descartes puts the point most strongly when he says that ‘all that up to the present time I have accepted as most true and certain I have learned either from the senses or through the senses’ (HR, 145). Exactly what he would include under ‘the senses’ here is perhaps somewhat indeterminate, but even if it is left vague many philosophers would deny what Descartes appears to be saying. They would hold that, for example, the mathematical knowledge I mentioned earlier is not and could not be acquired from the senses or through the senses, so not *everything* I know is known in that way. Whether Descartes is really denying the views of those who believe in the non-sensory character of mathematical knowledge, and whether, if he were, he would be right, are issues we can set aside for the moment. It is clear that the senses are at least

very important for human knowledge. Even restricting ourselves to the traditional five senses we can begin to appreciate their importance by reflecting on how little someone would ever come to know without them. A person blind and deaf from birth who also lacked taste buds and a sense of smell would know very little about anything, no matter how long he lived. To imagine him also anaesthetized or without a sense of touch is perhaps to stretch altogether too far one's conception of a human organism, or at least a human organism from whom we can hope to learn something about human knowledge. The importance of the senses as a source or channel of knowledge seems undeniable. It seems possible, then, to acknowledge their importance and to assess the reliability of that source, quite independently of the difficult question of whether *all* our knowledge comes to us in that way. We would then be assessing the credentials of what is often called our 'sensory' or 'experiential' or 'empirical' knowledge, and that, as we shall see, is quite enough to be going on with.

Having found an extremely important 'principle' or source of our knowledge, how can we investigate or assess *all* the knowledge we get from that source? As before, we are faced with the problem of the inexhaustibility of the things we believe on that basis, so no piecemeal, one-by-one procedure will do. But perhaps we can make a sweeping negative assessment. It might seem that as soon as we have found that the senses are one of the sources of our beliefs we are immediately in a position to condemn all putative knowledge derived from them. Some philosophers appear to have reasoned in this way, and many have even supposed that Descartes is among them. The idea is that if I am assessing the reliability of my beliefs and asking whether I really know what I take myself to know, and I come across a large class of beliefs which have come to me through the senses, I can immediately dismiss all those beliefs as unreliable or as not amounting to knowledge because of the obvious fact that I can sometimes be wrong in my beliefs based on the senses. Things are not always as they appear, so if on the basis of the way they appear to me I believe that they really are a certain way, I might still be wrong. We have all found at one time or

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