

1 Certainty and Doubt

Introduction

PHILOSOPHERS EVALUATE PATTERNS OF THINKING. In particular, they have often tried to find patterns of thinking which will give certainty about the world and about morals. Philosophical doubt is a way of finding out what beliefs are not certain, and logical arguments are a way of going from one belief to another belief that is just as certain. Many philosophers have doubted beliefs which others have thought certain – for example, the existence of God – and other philosophers have tried to find logical arguments to support these beliefs.

Rationalist philosophers are optimistic that we can get certainty about the world or about morals by using logical arguments and similar kinds of reasoning. They consider extreme forms of doubt in order to prove how certain their beliefs are.

Can our beliefs about right and wrong ever be made completely certain?...

Chapter Objectives

By the end of this chapter you should be able to answer the following questions.

- ◆ *What is philosophical doubt?*
- ◆ *Why does the closed belief trap suggest the certainty assumption?*
- ◆ *What is the difference between skepticism and dogmatism?*
- ◆ *Why is a moral skeptic not always a cynic?*
- ◆ *What is Socrates' argument for skepticism?*

Definitions

The following words used in this chapter are defined in the list of definitions at the end of the book:

<i>certainty assumption</i>	<i>metaphysics</i>	<i>skepticism</i>
<i>dogmatism</i>	<i>philosophical doubt</i>	

1.1 Patterns of Thought

Philosophy is thinking about thinking. (It is many other things too, as we shall see. But most of them connect with thinking about thinking.) We think about many things: what the world is like, what other people are thinking and feeling, what we should do. And when we think we follow patterns of thought. For example, you might be thinking what to do in a given situation. Then you might consider a list of options and try to discover the likely consequences for other people if you follow each one of those options. And then you might think whether one has the right to inflict those consequences on those people. That is a pattern of moral thinking. Another pattern of moral thinking might be to consult with more experienced or wiser people, and to do what they recommend.

Or – to take a very different example – you might be thinking what the weather will be like this season. (What sort of crop should you plant, and when should you plant it?) Then you might consult the Farmer's Almanac, which gives predictions for the year's weather on the basis of the weather in previous years and the behavior of animals. Or you might read many books on climate and weather, and many books on different plant species and on farming techniques, in order to try to make your own scientifically based prediction.

Philosophical questions take a pattern of thinking and ask how it works and how well it works.

In each case one can ask: what are the advantages and disadvantages of thinking in this way? If people think out moral problems in terms of consequences and rights, are they going to lead happy and harmonious social lives? Are they going to do the actions which, in some absolute sense, are “the” right actions? (Is there any such sense?) If people think about the weather on the basis of the Farmer's Almanac are they going to get true predictions? Are they going to get useful predictions? These are philosophical questions, because they take a pattern of thought and ask how it works and how well it works.

You have to know what your purpose is before you can discuss the advantages and disadvantages of a way of thinking. Is the aim to discover truth? To lead a good life? To make everyone happy? To survive? Different ways of thinking may be good or bad for these different purposes. Philosophy is slightly obsessed with the aim of discovering truth. And that is an aim worthy of respect; it dignifies the human species. But it is worth remembering that we can ask hard questions about how discovering truth relates to other human purposes – and that the first concern of most animals and many humans is not to arrive at the truth but just to survive.

Two kinds of thinking are particularly important. One is the careful reasoning from evidence that is found in science. (Not that science does not use imagination and intuition as well.) Or, more generally, this kind of thinking is any

logical thinking that is not based on fantasy or thoughtless obedience to authority, and that tries to establish in a step-by-step way what the world is like.

We can ask the same questions about this kind of thinking. When will it give true answers? How much of the truth about the world can it tell us? Are there disadvantages to thinking this way? (If someone concluded that science will give us false or incomplete answers then they might think that there is some other way of thinking that supplies more answers. Religion, perhaps. So then they might think that religious thinking has some advantages.) This would be a disadvantage of one kind of thinking, a limit to its powers, but not a disadvantage of another. So we are more likely to get some sensible conclusions if we ask about the advantages and disadvantages, or powers and limits, of particular kinds of thinking rather than of thinking in general.

The other important kind of thinking is the kind we use when we want above all to act as we ought to, to fulfill our obligations and to treat other people as they ought to be treated. This is moral thinking. It is particularly difficult when we have to make important decisions, where it is not obvious what the right thing to do is. Moral and political dilemmas face individuals and whole societies all the time. We think our way through these problems in a variety of ways. Several are discussed later in the book. Again, we can ask how well they work. We can pick some aim of decision-making – happiness, social harmony, or whatever – and ask whether people thinking through their decisions in some particular way will achieve this aim. And here another deep and important question arises. What are the right aims to choose? Does it make sense to ask what are the right decisions?

So philosophers pay most attention to two kinds of thinking – scientific, and moral/political. And there are reasons for thinking about these two kinds of thinking together, seeing how they combine and how they are different. One reason is that they can undermine or contradict one another. For example, scientific reasoning might show that human beings evolved from animals or that human psychology is based on desires for food, power, and sex. And this might destroy the foundations of the traditional moral codes that we rely on to solve social problems. Or an attractive way of making political decisions – for example, by democratic voting – might contradict a mathematical or psychological theory that says that this method will not work. (See the voting paradox in Box 2.) Conflicts are always possible between the ways we think out how things are, and the ways we think out how they ought to be. Boxes 1 and 2 describe two such conflicts. The only way to resolve them is to think about each pattern of thought and what can be expected of it.

A basic philosophical topic is the interaction of scientific thinking and moral or political thinking.

Box 1 How Psychology Could Conflict with Ethics

We praise people when they do good things and blame them when they do bad things. But there are exceptions. When someone does something good by accident we do not praise, and when someone does something bad by accident we do not blame. If person A runs out in front of person B's car and is injured, we do not blame B if there was no way of knowing what A was going to do.

In the past hundred years we have learned how people are shaped by their early childhood. Some psychologists believe that by the age of four, basic facts about your personality are fixed in ways that you cannot easily change. Suppose that your early childhood determines you to react with anger to people in authority. Then it is as difficult for you not to lose your temper when a superior at work criticizes you as it would be for a driver to know that someone was about to run in front of her car. Suppose that you assault your boss when she tells you your work is terrible. Should you be blamed for what you have done? You could not have helped it.

Psychological theories of this kind may be false. Or they may be true. But suppose such a theory was true. Would this show that we ought not to blame people for what they do? Would it make us think that there was little difference between drivers involved in accidents they could not anticipate, and people who assault others? Finding out how we would change our beliefs about right and wrong, praise and blame, if we came to think that people have no choice over their actions is a typical philosophical problem. It is philosophical because it involves comparing very different ways of thinking, and seeing how they are related. (Free action is discussed in Chapter 14, Sections 4 to 7.)

Box 2 A Voting Paradox

We have three people, and they have to choose between three candidates for dog catcher.

Alice's preferences are: 1st choice Mark, 2nd choice Luke, 3rd choice John.
Bella's preferences are: 1st choice Luke, 2nd choice John, 3rd choice Mark.
Carol's preferences are: 1st choice John, 2nd choice Mark, 3rd choice Luke.

So a majority – Alice and Carol – prefer Mark to Luke. And a majority – Alice and Bella – prefer Luke to John. So it might seem that the top candidate should be Mark, then second Luke, and third John. But wait a moment: a majority – Bella and Carol – prefer John to Mark. So what seemed like the bottom candidate is preferred to the top candidate.

Suppose they first vote between Mark and Luke, and then between the winner and John. Luke will be eliminated; John will beat Mark and get the job. Suppose that they first vote between Luke and John, and then between the winner and Mark. John will be eliminated; Mark will beat Luke and get the job. So who wins depends on the order in which the votes are taken.

Does this show something wrong with democratic voting?

1.2 How Conventional Are Your Beliefs?

Most people believe most of the 14 claims on the list below. (Most people you are likely to know, that is.) So you very likely believe most of them. But it is unlikely that you believe all of them. To see whether you have a very ordinary or a rather unusual set of beliefs, ask yourself whether you agree or disagree with them.

In each case you should score your reactions 1–5 as follows: (1) strongly agree, (2) tend to agree, (3) no opinion or don't know or can't decide, (4) tend to disagree, and (5) strongly disagree. (You may think some of them are too vague or unclear to have an opinion about. In that case score 3.)



- (a) There is no intelligent life on the other planets of our solar system.
- (b) Germs, viruses, and other tiny living things cause many diseases.
- (c) People who act kindly to others are usually happier than those who act cruelly.
- (d) This universe is the only one there is.
- (e) It is wrong to inflict pain on other animals for no good reason.
- (f) Humans may kill animals in order to eat them.
- (g) A human life is not complete if it does not include some religious or spiritual aspect.
- (h) There really are chairs and trees around us, but numbers and geometrical shapes are simply things we invented to help us think.
- (i) Children do not have the same rights as adults to make important decisions for themselves.
- (j) The earth is a very small and not very central part of the whole physical universe.
- (k) The lives of all people are equally valuable.
- (l) Most of what is written in science textbooks is true.
- (m) We can be completely sure that the chairs and trees around us really exist, but the electrons and quasars discussed in physics may turn out to be illusions.
- (n) People who commit crimes of violence should be punished, whether or not this makes them less likely to commit more crimes.

Now add up the numbers corresponding to your reactions to the fourteen claims, and use your score to compare yourself with three intellectual personality types.

Type A people have beliefs that are very similar to those around them. They may have grown up among people who are very certain in their views, and who have never questioned their beliefs. Or they may have reflected deeply and decided that the views of their society are in fact right. A type A person might score 30 or less on these questions. (A score of 20 or less suggests that a person agrees with most people more than most people do!)

Type B people have normally conventional beliefs. They do not disagree much with what most people around them think, but they have been exposed to some influences from beyond their immediate upbringing and they take some of these influences seriously. A type B person might score between 31 and 42 on these questions.

Type C people have slightly unconventional beliefs. Because of influences on them, or their experiences, or because of their own thinking, they suspect that some important beliefs of the people around them might be wrong. A type C person might score between 43 and 54 on these questions.

Type D people have radically unconventional beliefs. They may have thought very deeply in a way that makes them think differently from most people. Or they may be in rebellion against their upbringing. A type D person might score between 55 and 70 on these questions. (A score of 60 or more suggests that a person may disagree with others so much that it is sometimes hard to communicate with them.)

Do you recognize yourself in any of these types? If so, does your score on the questions agree? If not, why? Would different questions have revealed something that these questions miss?

A more subtle diagnosis

If your score suggests you are type A or type B, look again at your answers to (a), (d), (j), and (l). If the score for these adds up to 6 or less it might be fair to describe you as a scientific dogmatist. You think that contemporary science is the best and last word on the way things are. Then look again at your answers to (c), (g), (i), and (k). If the score for these adds up to 6 or less it might be fair to describe you as a moral or religious dogmatist. You think that the beliefs you were raised with about what is valuable are not to be doubted.

If your score suggests you are a type C or type D, look again at your answers to (a), (b), (d), and (j). If the score for these adds up to 20 or more then it might be fair to describe you as having an alternative belief system. Your beliefs may come from some source or authority different from those of most people. If on the other hand your score suggests you have slightly or radically unconventional beliefs and your score for (a), (b), (d), and (j) does not add up to 20 or more, then it might be fair to describe you as an individual thinker. You make up your own mind about what to believe.

Note: This was a very short and simple questionnaire. It could easily give a wrong description of your beliefs. If you think the description is wrong, find three beliefs that you would agree with but that someone who truly fitted the description would not agree with.

Studying philosophy is not going to tell you which of the 14 beliefs listed above are true. What it can do is to show you how to think out disagreements about things like these. And it can help you to discover the deeper causes of disagreements about things like these.

Type A and B people should consider whether it is really so likely that so many of the beliefs that people happen to hold at this moment in time are true. Thinking about the reasons why some philosophers are skeptical about knowledge and about morals should help with this.

People with an alternative belief system should consider whether the reasons they have for their beliefs would really stand up to some hard questioning. Thinking about why philosophers usually find a way out of really profound skepticism should help with this.

Individual thinkers should consider whether their own powers of thinking are really enough. Can you really think everything out for yourself? Thinking about the reasons many philosophers have for thinking of human reason as a feeble and fallible tool should help you with this.

And whatever your position or personality, you will want to be able to defend your beliefs. Defending your beliefs may involve finding a few that are weaker than the rest and that have to be sacrificed for the good of the whole. To do this you need to develop your powers of argument, and you need to know what attacks on your beliefs to expect.

If you are reading this in a classroom context you might pause to find out the answers to the following questions:

- ◆ What is the average score for your whole class or group on the questions?
- ◆ Which intellectual personality type – A, B, C, D – do the greatest number of people fall into?
- ◆ How many are surprised at the number of people of different types from themselves?
- ◆ What reasons do people with conventional beliefs give for people having unconventional beliefs?
- ◆ What reasons do people with unconventional beliefs give for people having conventional beliefs?

Note: Although most people now believe most of the 14 claims listed above, many people do not believe some of them. And most people in some cultures in the past have disagreed with many of them. Moreover, philosophers have given thought-provoking reasons why we should not believe some of them.

Each of (a), (b), (c), (d), (f), (j), and (k) would have been strongly disagreed with by most people in some culture in the past. And for each of (d), (e), (g), (h), (i), (j), (k), (l), and (m) there is some great philosopher who has argued that it is false.

1.3 Conviction, Opinion, Doubt, and Belief

Separate the following claims into (a) convictions (that is, things that you are absolutely sure are true); (b) opinions (that is, things you think are true, though



you are not absolutely sure); (c) conjectures (that is, things that you think might be true); and (d) doubts (that is, things that you think are probably not true). You can record your answers by putting (a) to (d) in the second column of the list below.

Claim	Score (a)–(d) here	Score (i)–(v) here
(1) Washington is the capital of the USA		
(2) Each human being has a destiny that they must follow		
(3) $38 + 12 = 40$		
(4) Murder is wrong		
(5) There is a God		
(6) Dinosaurs once lived on the earth		
(7) Everything in the Bible is true		
(8) People should never tell lies		
(9) People are born again in other bodies after their deaths		
(10) Water is a compound of hydrogen and oxygen		
(11) The moon is a satellite of the earth		
(12) Greed and selfishness usually lead to a happy life		
(13) Democratic government is the only way of having a fair society		

Check whether other people (for example, others in your classroom or discussion group) classify these into convictions, opinions, conjectures, and doubts in the same way that you do. Do not discuss your disagreements directly, but see if you can trace them to deeper disagreements about the value of different patterns of thought. Some of these patterns of thought are listed as (i) to (vi) below:

- (i) reliance on religious authority;
- (ii) reliance on textbook science;
- (iii) believing what most other people believe;
- (iv) reasoning from evidence by the scientific method;
- (v) generalizing from your own experience;
- (vi) trusting your own intuitive convictions.

Are there other patterns that may be partially responsible for your disagreements?

Choose four claims from the list of 13 above that you and others classify differently. Now go back to the list, and in the third column write the number

of the pattern of thought (from (i) to (vi)) that is most relevant to the disagreement. Discuss with others before you make your choice.

If several groups have carried out this exercise they may find that each group has identified different patterns of thought. Why is this?

Are there items on the list that you classify as both conjectures and doubts? Is this because you are pulled one way by one pattern of thought and another by a different one? Which ones?

Philosophers use the word “belief” in a slightly special way, so that conjectures and doubts are not beliefs, and opinions and convictions are beliefs. A belief is, roughly speaking, anything you will say “yes” to if asked if it is true. So, using the word “belief” in the way philosophers do, which of (1) to (13) do you believe?

1.4 Trusting Textbooks

Consider the pattern of thinking summed up by this rule: believe *only* what you can find in school textbooks of physics and chemistry. Suppose that you do not doubt the truth of anything in these books. What problems might still arise about this rule?



Here are some problems that might arise. Which ones are the most serious problems?

- (a) Perhaps these “bibles” cannot be used without information derived from other sources.
- (b) Perhaps there are important questions that they will not give answers to.
- (c) Perhaps some claims in some textbooks contradict some claims in other textbooks.
- (d) Perhaps the rule “believe only what you can find in school textbooks of physics and chemistry” is not itself found in any such textbook.
- (e) Perhaps just from reading the textbooks you cannot know what they mean. (Perhaps they need interpretation.)
- (f) Perhaps there are alternative interpretations of the textbooks.

Here are some situations where these problems might arise.

- (1) You want to know what kinds of food will be tasty.
- (2) You want to know what color the statue on your aunt’s mantelpiece will turn if you drop it in a vat of sulphuric acid.
- (3) You want to know if you should make your career in corporation law or in famine relief.
- (4) You want to know how many gallons of fuel your car will use in an hour, but your textbooks describe everything in liters and meters.

- (5) You want to know why some people have more energy than others.
- (6) You find a book about what substances are found in various foods, without a title or preface identifying it as a chemistry or physics book, and you want to know if you should believe what it says.

Which of the problems (a)–(f) are likely to arise in which of the situations (1)–(6)? For example, problem (2) is likely to arise in situation (a), because the textbook is not going to tell you what the chemical composition of the statue is. (Some problems may occur in more than one situation, and in some situations more than one problem may occur.)

There are many questions that you can ask about a pattern of thinking besides “Does it give true conclusions?” Some such questions are: “Can people actually think in this way?” “How much understanding will thinking in this way give?” “What effects will thinking in this way have on people’s lives (what is the cost)?” “Is there a better way of solving whatever problems the thinking deals with?” There are many others.

1.5 Certainty: the Closed-belief Trap

Patterns of thinking are ways of changing our beliefs or desires. Astronomers think about the stars they see in the sky and come up with beliefs about the universe; political thinkers consider the problems of their societies and come up with suggestions about desirable ways out of them. How do we know that

Are the things people normally believe just a delusional system that everyone shares? To show that they are not, philosophers often try to show that some of our beliefs are absolutely certain.

the beliefs we come up with are true, and that the desires we come up with are for anything worthwhile? We could look for evidence. But that could be wrong too. The stars we think we see in the sky could be illusions; and we could be wrong about the nature of our social problems and the consequences of our proposed solutions. We are always judging beliefs and desires against other beliefs and desires.

“So what?” you may say. How else could it be? But this situation is responsible for a worry that lies behind many philosophical projects. The worry is that our beliefs and desires may form a closed self-sustaining system, like an incurable delusion or a closed-off ideology. Let me describe this worry in more detail.

Suppose someone has paranoid delusions. She thinks that everyone is plotting against her and trying to cause her harm. You try to explain to her that this conviction is ruining her life, and urge her to get some treatment. But of course she just thinks you are saying this for some purpose of your own, which will result in harm for her. Whatever you say will be twisted by her to fit her delusions.

Next consider a group of people with a group ideology. They have some strange beliefs, perhaps that aliens are going to save them from a flood that will

devastate the earth. Every piece of evidence that is presented to them can be either interpreted as supporting this belief, or rejected as an attempt to deceive them. Their beliefs give the group cohesion, and support strong emotions of solidarity and suspicion. The combination of the structure of the belief and the structure of the group means that it is extremely hard to persuade members of the group to have the slightest doubt about their shared ideology.

In both these cases a whole system of beliefs is immunized against refutation. It has ways of adapting or ignoring any evidence or argument used against it. So if it contains false beliefs, they will never be discovered by someone still in the grip of the system. Someone remaining in the grip of the system will have the comfort of thinking that they are right and everyone else is wrong, while in fact their beliefs are full of errors. But someone who escapes from the grip of the system will feel a sudden rush of liberation, as if their eyes had suddenly been opened.

The deep philosophical worry is this: we don't think we are caught in any such closed-belief trap. Our eyes feel open. But then that is just what we would think if we were caught in a self-sustaining delusion. How can we be sure that our normal system of beliefs, including beliefs about the world around us, beliefs about right and wrong, beliefs about our political ideals, and many others, do not form such a system? If we were really fundamentally wrong about the universe, and about right and wrong, would we ever find out? (To think more about this, work through Section 1.7.)

There is no doubt that we do usually interpret evidence, new beliefs, in terms of the beliefs we already have. So, for example, if you seem to see a purple and green striped elephant suddenly appear and dance on its trunk around the room and then disappear, you are likely to dismiss this as an illusion or a hallucination. (Why? Because without even knowing it you have the belief that there are no purple and green striped elephants, and that people who seem to see what does not exist are suffering from illusions or hallucinations. If you had been raised in a different culture you might have thought that you were really seeing a particularly vivid manifestation of the elephant god.)

And if you are deciding what you should do in a difficult situation you rely on the values you absorbed from your society as a child. And the emotions you feel in response to a situation are affected by the models and ideals presented to you by your culture. What is the difference between this and a group delusion? (To think more about this, work through Section 1.6.)

Many philosophers have wanted to show that some beliefs and values are not just self-sustaining delusions. (Sometimes they have wanted to defend the beliefs and values of their time and place, sometimes some beliefs and values that they have invented for the purpose.) In doing this they have often made an assumption, which I shall call the *certainty assumption*. It is that the way to show that beliefs are not illusions of this kind is to show that they are *certain*, that we can be absolutely sure they are not false. We can show that there is no way they could be false. If we can convince ourselves that a belief

is certain in this way – better still, if we can show that it is part of a system of beliefs all of which are certain – then we know that in believing it we are not falling into a delusional trap.

The certainty assumption is very demanding. It is extremely hard to know that something you believe couldn't possibly be false. And it is important to see that the assumption is not in any way forced on us. We don't have to make it. Still, philosophers have put a lot of effort into showing that their chosen beliefs are certain: beliefs about the world, beliefs about mathematics, beliefs about political systems, or beliefs about how we should act. And it is clear what the appeal of the assumption is, why it is so tempting. For *if* we could show that a central core of our beliefs were absolutely certain then we could conclude that we were not doomed to remain in some delusional system.

The certainty assumption has an emotional as well as an intellectual appeal. For many people grow up with a very definite set of religious and moral beliefs, which structure their lives. Without them they would be lost. If you have grown up in such an atmosphere of certainty then you will not trust beliefs that are not certain. Ideally, you want to show that your own religious and moral beliefs are certain. As a second best, you might want some other set of beliefs that is just as comfortingly sure. Then you would not be lost.

Part I of this book starts with seeing what happens when we make the certainty assumption. Then we will see some reasons why it is dubious; why certainty is very rare in both science and morals. The questions we are asking here concern the sources of conviction and of doubt – what general systematic things can we say about what makes a belief certain and what makes it doubtful? Eventually we will be able to see how to discuss belief and delusion without making the certainty assumption.

1.6 Cheat: a Story about Deception

Last week, three of us were playing cards late at night. We were Hilary, Robin, and Sammy – I'm not yet going to tell you which one I was. We were playing Cheat, which is a game that little children often play, but if you are really smart and subtle like me you can find a special smart and subtle interest in it.

Cheat works like this. You deal out the deck among all the players. Then one player starts by putting down a card, face down, and says what it is. Then each player in turn has to put up to four cards, face down, on the growing pile. The cards have to be all the same and in sequence with what the previous player put down: so if the last cards were sevens you have to put down eights or sixes. Or at any rate you have to *say* that you have put down eights or sixes. The aim is to get rid of all your cards before anyone else does. So if you have only one eight, or no eights at all, you might put down four cards and say they were eights. Anyone who thinks you are lying can challenge you by saying

Box 3 Quixotic Doubt

Vivid examples of the false-belief trap are found in several works of literature. Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, a classic of Spanish literature, is a good example. It concerns Don Quixote, a Spanish nobleman living after the age of chivalry, who has immersed himself in the mystique of knights on horseback doing brave deeds and rescuing innocent maidens. He lives in a social world where these ideas are not recognized, but he insists on traveling around acting like a chivalrous knight. He is accompanied by his servant, Sancho Panza, who is a sensible and down-to-earth person. On many occasions Quixote interprets what is happening in terms of the completely inappropriate concepts of chivalry. He sees windmills as giants and charges at them. When the sails of the windmills turn and strike him he takes this as confirming his belief, as the "giants" have moved their giant arms. He sees a flock of sheep as the dust made by two armies going into battle and rides off to join the losing side, and when the shepherds try to stop him from riding into their sheep he takes this as more evidence that he is in a battle. He sees a man walking along with a basin over his head to protect himself from the rain, and interprets this as an enemy in an enormous helmet. When the peculiar size and shape of the helmet is pointed out to him he makes up an elaborate story about the kind of foreigner who would have such a helmet. When Sancho suggests that the helmet looks a lot like a basin he replies that a helmet that looks like a basin must be repaired, so he must take it and get it restored into proper helmet shape.

Many stories have fools in them, who believe ridiculous things. But Don Quixote is no fool. His strange beliefs come from his thinking too much, and too elaborately. He can reinterpret any evidence to suit him. He does so because he is the prisoner of some beliefs, the ideas of chivalry, that shape all his thinking. As the book develops, the sensible Sancho is caught up in his master's delusions, and very often his common sense is not enough to protect him from the power of Quixote's imagination. Cervantes wants the reader not only to laugh at Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, but also to have a sense of troubling recognition: are all of us not like them?

"Cheat!" If you were lying you have to pick up the whole pile. But if you were telling the truth the person who challenged you has to pick it up. I'm sure people all over the world play versions of this game, whatever names they call it.

Well, we were in the middle of a game, and I was doing quite well. I was down to four cards in my hand, when the person to my right put down four cards and said "four threes." I was pretty sure four threes had already been played and were sitting there in the pile. So I cried out "Cheat!" And, what do you know, I was wrong – they were four honest threes. So I had to pick up about twenty cards. This made me think why it was hard to know whether the other person was telling the truth. The problem is that you know what

cards are in your hand, but you don't know which of the other players has which of the other cards. And you don't know what is in the deck. If you have two threes and the other person says they are putting down three threes you know they are lying, but if they say they are putting down two threes you just don't know.

So I decided to be very careful. The pile was starting again from nothing now, so I memorized all the cards people were putting down. I'm really organized in my head, so I can do that. And I didn't accuse anyone of lying unless I knew that the cards in the pile and the cards in my hand made what they said impossible.

Then the most amazing thing happened. The person to my right – same sneaky person – put down three cards and said “three jacks.” Well, that very person had put down three jacks the time before. And it sure wasn't a six-jack deck. So I called out “Cheat!” But when the cards were turned over they were three jacks. Since I had to pick up the pile I searched through it to see what had happened for the last twelve moves. (They got a bit impatient about this, but it was my house and my beer and my cards.) What I discovered was that my sneaky neighbor had been lying even when she could have told the truth. Not the play before but the one before that, she had had to put down jacks or nines, and had three jacks in her hand, but she had put down two nines and a five and said they were three jacks. Why? Just so that next time round she could put down three jacks and sucker me into calling her a liar. It was when she was telling the truth that she was fooling me.

From that point onward I played as sneakily as I could, trying to get even. I never told the truth at all. And they kept calling “Cheat” on me. I figured out why. Since I was lying all the time they knew I was lying all the time, even when they couldn't prove it directly. So I got sneakier yet, and decided to lie every third move. But just as I was getting into this, Hilary played her last card and the game ended. I had the most cards in my hand so I had to write all three term papers due the next morning. It only took me an hour.

While I was writing the term papers (a philosophy course – I can handle that stuff with half my mind, or maybe a quarter), we talked about how to play Cheat. I had already figured out Sammy's strategy. She would lie when she could tell the truth, so that when she was telling the truth you would think she was lying. I thought that was pretty tricky, but Hilary's strategy was even trickier. She told the truth nearly all the time, so whenever you challenged her you were wrong and had to pick up the pile. Then when she didn't have the right card she would coolly put down another card and call it what someone else had put down about twelve moves before, and no one would dare challenge her. They'd always figure it was the other person who had been lying. They'd even think that perhaps they had been lying when they hadn't.

Next morning I went to class – a 9 a.m. class – to deliver the essays. But it had been cancelled! I could have waited until next week to write the papers. And there on the blackboard was a message from Hilary and Sammy, saying

“Hi. Hope you like our little trick.” And they had written it the previous evening. The cheats.

This made me think. If they could fool me they could fool anybody. Just about. And maybe more people were fooling me. Especially if they used Sammy’s trick: lying when you don’t have to, just to set up suspicions about what is actually the truth. And maybe some people were using Hilary’s strategy, telling the truth until something crucial comes along, and then lying. And suppose my parents and all the people around me had been doing this all my life?

These thoughts really upset me. I began to doubt everything everyone said to me. I began to sleep badly. I stopped reading newspapers because I didn’t trust them. So I went to the student counselling service and had an interview with a counsellor. He persuaded me that there was no point doubting everything because you just go crazy that way. I found this quite comforting, and the counsellor said he’d tell me more next time but we had to stop now because he had to go see an urgent case – a suicidal student. I walked back to my room, but on the way I saw the counsellor going into a restaurant with Sammy.

For all of the next day I decided to be the only person who always told the truth. But then I thought, “if everyone is lying to me then most of what I believe is false.” And even the people who are talking straight to me are passing on information from others, who might be lying. So when I try to tell the truth I am just passing on more lies. It would be more honest to lie all the time. So that’s what I do now. In fact this story never happened; it’s a lie too. And though you think you know my name is Robin, and Hilary and Sammy are girls, and that Sammy was sitting to my right at the game, that’s a lie too. Or maybe it isn’t.

1.7 Tree-worshipers and Flat-earththers

Tree-worshipers

Consider the tree-worshipers. They are an ancient and very civilized culture whose beliefs are (probably) quite different from yours. Their system of beliefs is centered on a faith in the power of trees. The wind blows because trees wave their branches and fan it along; winter comes because trees drop their leaves and thus allow heat to flow out of the earth along their twigs; people can think and feel, though in a way that is crude compared to the thoughts and emotions of trees, because the structure of their nerves resembles the root-system of a tree. (So they describe their emotions in terms of, for example, feeling parched, feeling buds forming, wanting pollination, and so on.) The history of the universe is best understood in terms of a primal acorn growing in cosmic dust until it becomes a branching tree-structure of galaxies. Whenever you ask them “why?”, the “because,” for the tree-worshipers, involves some reference to what trees can do.



Imagine that you are a modern scientifically minded person, and that you find yourself living among the tree-worshippers. You want to persuade them that their views are wrong. For example, you might point out that winter and summer also occur in some deserts where there are no trees. Or you might propose an experiment in which trees are cut down in order to see whether the wind becomes less strong.

Think of three more such points you could make which might show them weaknesses in their view of the world. State each in one or two sentences. State them right here.

- (1) _____

- (2) _____

- (3) _____

But the tree-worshippers could have answers to these points. For example, they could reply to the objection that summer and winter happen in deserts by saying that in winter the heat in the earth beneath desert regions is drained through the leafless trees of nearby tree-rich regions and by the wind. That is one reason why trees make wind: they want to blow air over deserts and the sea to cool them down. And typically there are stronger winds in winter. And they could refuse even to consider any experiment involving cutting down trees, on the grounds of the harm caused to these sacred creatures.

What answers might they make to your three points? Actually state answers they could give. Write down one-sentence answers they might make to your (1), (2), (3) above. Write them below. And below each, write a reply you might make to their answer.

- reply to (1) _____

- response to reply _____

- reply to (2) _____

- response to reply _____

- reply to (3) _____

- response to reply _____

(An alternative method is for each person to write (1), (2), (3), then pass them to another person for replies, and then to a third for responses to the replies.)

This could be the beginning of a discussion between you or some other representative of our culture and the tree-worshippers. It would have to be a very long discussion. At the end – supposing that they are intelligent and reasonable – what do you think you will have persuaded them? Will their views have changed? In the direction of being more like yours or more unlike yours?

Flat-earththers

Think of the reasons we have for believing that the earth is roughly spherical. (Actually write down several – six, perhaps. For example, if you fly a plane due west for long enough you eventually end up where you started.) Now imagine a convinced and intelligent flat-earthther – that is, someone who believes that the earth is a flat disk rather than a sphere. Find a reply that the flat-earthther can make to each of your reasons for thinking that the earth is spherical. Make the replies interesting enough so that they actually might make a spherical-earthther hesitate. (Examples: Has anyone actually flown a plane absolutely due west all the way around the earth? Why should we believe that following a compass needle always leads you in a straight line rather than in a circle?)



Did you find your imaginary flat-earthther challenging any of the following scientific beliefs?

Scientific beliefs	Advantages
(a) Light travels in straight lines, rather than in circles or other curves.	
(b) The sun follows a regular straight or uniformly curved path through the sky.	
(c) What look like the same stars and constellations seen from different parts of the earth really are the same stars and constellations.	
(d) Compasses do generally point to the north, and when they do not we can correct for the fact.	

Suppose that someone were to deny all of these scientific beliefs. They might then be able to defend the claim that the earth is not even roughly spherical. But there would be a price to pay. Items (i) to (v) below are some advantages of our standard scientific beliefs that might be lost by someone who denied (a) to (d). In the right column above, mark which of the advantages (i) to (v) could be lost if that belief were denied.

- (i) We can predict what stars will be in what positions at different points on the earth.
- (ii) We can explain how telescopes, microscopes, and eyes work.
- (iii) We can predict eclipses and other changes in the heavens.
- (iv) We can navigate by the stars.
- (v) We can explain the world around the earth using the same principles we use for explaining what happens on earth.

1.8 Revising History: 1984

In his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* George Orwell describes a horrifying totalitarian state in which the government controls every aspect of people's lives and thoughts. Here the central character, Winston, is puzzling over the discrepancy between his own apparent memories and official history.

At this moment, for example, in 1984 (if it was 1984), Oceania was at war with Eurasia and in alliance with Eastasia. In no public or private utterance was it ever admitted that the three powers had at any time been grouped along different lines. Actually, as Winston well knew, it was only four years since Oceania had been at war with Eastasia and in alliance with Eurasia. But that was merely a piece of furtive knowledge which he happened to possess because his memory was not satisfactorily under control. Officially the change of partners had never happened. Oceania was at war with Eurasia; therefore Oceania had always been at war with Eurasia. . . .

The frightening thing . . . was that it might all be true. If the Party could thrust its hand into the past and say of this or that event, it never happened – that, surely, was more terrifying than mere torture and death?

The Party said that Oceania had never been in alliance with Eurasia. He, Winston Smith, knew that Oceania had been in alliance with Eurasia as short a time as four years ago. But where did that knowledge exist? Only in his own consciousness, which in any case must soon be annihilated. And if all others accepted the lie . . . then the lie passed into history and became truth. . . . It was quite simple. All that was needed was an unending series of victories over your own memory.



Does Winston think that the party's version of history, or his, is actually true? There is support in the text for each possibility. Underline sentences in the text above that suggest that he thinks the party's version of history is true. Ring any sentences that suggest he thinks that his remembered version is true.

It is more interesting, and more frightening, to consider how he might think of his own memories as false. What, according to this selection, allows him to think this?

Could there be a society in which people allowed the state to correct their memories? Could the control be so complete that a single person had no way

of being sure that he or she was not simply suffering from delusions? Are there ways in which our society might be thought to be like this?

1.9 Doubt

If you can *show* that it is certain that something is true then you can refute anyone who doubts it. So a good technique for probing how much delusion or error there could be in some beliefs – the results of a way of thinking – is to see how you could try to refute someone who doubted them. To do this you need people who doubt. They can be real people, or imaginary people invented for the sake of a philosophical experiment.

These doubters are skeptics. Their attitude is *skepticism*. There are real skeptics, people who doubt whether science gives the truth about the universe, or whether orthodox medicine actually cures diseases, or whether God exists, or whether democracy is a good system of government. In philosophy we also consider doubt about things which no real person doubts. For example, we need to consider skepticism about whether there really is a physical world around us (whether your body and the earth you stand on really exist) or about the existence of other minds (whether the people around you really do have thoughts and feelings much like yours). Perhaps it is not psychologically possible for a person to doubt the existence of the physical world or the minds of other people. But still, we can consider a skeptical attitude to these things, and how it might be defended or attacked.

As a result, the range of things that can be doubted, the range of topics where we can consider the pros and cons of a skeptical attitude, is very wide. And one dimension to this range is whether the skepticism is about a fairly small, perhaps practical, matter; or whether it is about something extremely fundamental, perhaps so fundamental that it is hard to imagine someone failing to have the belief. For example, a practical skepticism about science might involve doubting whether conventional science-based medicine really does know the causes of, or have cures for, life-threatening diseases: whether, for example, chemotherapy is actually effective against leukemia. A more abstract skepticism about science might doubt whether the methods used to conduct scientific experiments and create scientific theories are suitable for understanding some things. (For example, science might be unsuitable for studying the human mind, or human society, or such possibilities as telepathy.) And a very abstract “metaphysical” skepticism about science might argue that science is fundamentally mistaken because it assumes that the physical world is real when in fact it is an illusion.

There is a similar range of skeptical attitudes to moral matters. At the straightforward end of the range, someone might doubt that some ordinary beliefs about morality are right. For example, they might doubt that it is in fact wrong to tell lies, or that patriotism is a virtue. And at a middle level,

someone might doubt a fairly fundamental value of their culture: for example, someone might doubt that an ordered society in which people live productive contented lives is better than an anarchic one in which people can act without constraint. And then at the “metaphysical” end of the range, there may be an extreme moral cynic who says “all these fools are deluding themselves that there is a difference between right and wrong.”

(I called the extreme positions “metaphysical.” “Metaphysics” and “metaphysical” do not have very clear meanings, but they usually mean “concerned with our really basic beliefs about reality, those which it would be very hard to doubt, or for that matter to find evidence for”.)

In everyday life, if one person says something and another describes herself as skeptical, she means that she doubts that what the first person said is true. (“My car can accelerate to 100 mph in five seconds.” “I’m just a bit skeptical about that.”) Skepticism in philosophy usually differs from this in two ways.

The first is the kind of things that are doubted. In philosophy it is usually most profitable to consider how one might doubt things that are commonly believed and fairly difficult to doubt. (For example, the kinds of skepticism about science and about morals discussed in the last section.) The reason why it is more profitable to consider doubt about these things is that philosophy examines the value of various ways of thinking. So in philosophy we focus on the beliefs that come out of particular commonly used patterns of thought, and consider how one might doubt them.

But there is another characteristic of philosophical doubt. Outside philosophy “I doubt it” often just means “I think it’s false.” Someone says to you “Although I borrowed your car yesterday and returned it eight hours and 500 miles later I am not responsible for all those scratches and dents,” and you say “I doubt you.” Here you are saying that you think that what the person said was false. But sometimes people are more subtle, or perhaps more careful, in what their doubt amounts to. If someone asks you if you think there is life elsewhere in the universe, and you say “I’m inclined to doubt it,” you may well just mean “I don’t know that there is life elsewhere” rather than “I believe that there is no life elsewhere.” (Note that one might then say “I’m skeptical about that.”)

When philosophers talk of doubting something they usually mean something even more abstract. They usually mean that they do not believe that the reasons or evidence for the claim justify it according to the very high standards that come from some philosophical theory. So, for example, philosophical skepticism about whether people have thoughts and feelings does not usually express the thought “perhaps people don’t have thoughts and feelings” (let alone the thought “it is false that people have thoughts and feelings”). Instead, it will normally express the thought “the reasons we normally give for attributing thoughts and feelings to people might be good enough for everyday life, but they aren’t good enough for philosophy.”

(But there is a position, eliminative materialism, that does come near to denying that people have thoughts and feelings. It is discussed in Part III of this book, in Chapter 12, Section 11.)

So there are three kinds of doubt: *vulgar doubt* just means thinking that something is false; *careful doubt* means not thinking that it is true; and *philosophical doubt* means thinking that the reasons for believing something do not meet really high standards.

1.10 Doubting What Someone Says

Here is a series of mini-discussions. In each of them the second person is expressing doubt about what the first person is saying. After the mini-discussions there is a table, in which you should mark the cases where the doubt is likely to be vulgar doubt, careful doubt, or philosophical doubt, respectively. (In some cases it may be more than one of them.)

The definitions again: *vulgar doubt* just means thinking that something is false; *careful doubt* means not thinking that it is true; and *philosophical doubt* means thinking that the reasons for believing something are not convincing. Now here are the mini-discussions:



(1) Adam: The CIA murdered my cat. I saw two men in trench coats hanging around my yard, and talking into cellular phones, then I found my dear puss dead.

Boris: I really doubt that.

(2) Alice: My grandmother was dying from leukemia and she visited a faith healer. He put his hands on her head and said a prayer and she was cured.

Bertha: Perhaps she just went into spontaneous remission, and the episode with the healer was just a coincidence.

(3) Alphonso: We now know that the universe is billions of years old. With modern telescopes we can see galaxies that are so far away that it must have taken billions of years for their light to get to us.

Brigitta: How do you know that these galaxies really exist? Perhaps nothing we see through telescopes is the way it looks. Perhaps something we just don't understand makes these images appear in them.

(4) Andrea: There are many simple mathematical problems that have never been solved. For example, we still don't know if the series of pairs of prime numbers separated by just one other number – like 2 and 3, 5 and 7, 17 and 19 – goes on for ever, or whether there is a greatest such pair.

Brunhilde: You're assuming that these questions have answers waiting for us to discover them. Perhaps in fact we invent rather than discover these

things. So perhaps the greatest pair of these primes doesn't exist until someone finds a proof that makes mathematicians happy.

(5) Arturo: It is important that everyone in society has equal access to education. Otherwise some people have their prospects in life unfairly restricted.
Beatrice: I'm not convinced. Who will dig the ditches and drive the taxis when everyone has a Ph.D.?

(6) Asphodelia: George treated me really badly. He said he would be here at noon, and now I've been waiting three hours in the rain.
Bruno: Don't judge him so harshly. Perhaps his car wouldn't start.

(7) Albert: I've just read in the paper about a man who murdered 12 people because he didn't like the magazines they were reading. How can anyone be so bad?
Belinda: I think I remember reading he belonged to some weird religion. Perhaps they're right: after all, some of those magazines give me pretty evil thoughts – mostly lust for material possessions. Who knows, maybe murder isn't so wrong on the ultimate scale of things after all?

(8) Acacia: I think Carol must subconsciously hate me. She says she's my friend, but she's always telling my other friends malicious things about me, and she always seems to turn the conversation so that what I say sounds ridiculous.
Barry: I'm not convinced you can explain anything with all this subconscious stuff. Who knows why she's always causing you grief.

Mini-discussion	Vulgar doubt	Careful doubt	Philosophical doubt
(1) Adam and Boris			
(2) Alice and Bertha			
(3) Alphonso and Brigitta			
(4) Andrea and Brunhilde			
(5) Arturo and Beatrice			
(6) Asphodelia and Bruno			
(7) Albert and Belinda			
(8) Acacia and Barry			

Which cases (if any) of vulgar or careful doubt are also cases of philosophical doubt? Which cases (if any) of vulgar or careful doubt are *not* cases of

philosophical doubt? Which cases of philosophical doubt are *not* cases of careful or vulgar doubt?

In which cases where what the person expresses is philosophical doubt might it be reasonable also to express careful or vulgar doubt? (That is, when would it not be crazy or stupid or completely weird to have a vulgar or careful doubt?) In which cases where what the person expresses is vulgar or careful doubt might it be reasonable also to express philosophical doubt about the question?

You should find that there is an ordering in strength of the three kinds of doubt. When it is reasonable to have a vulgar doubt about something then it is usually reasonable to have the other kinds of doubt. And when it is reasonable to have a careful doubt it is usually also reasonable to have a philosophical doubt. But not the other way round. So the range of topics about which there can be philosophical doubt (sometimes as well as the other kinds) is very wide.

1.11 How Skeptical Are You?

Issues of skepticism are quite troubling to many people. Some people are rather *dogmatic* in their opinions. That is, they have very definite beliefs and they cannot see how any intelligent or well-informed person could disagree with them. Others are rather *skeptical* in their opinions. That is, they are inclined to think that the truth, if there is such a thing, is very hard to know, and so we should not give too much authority to what anyone says. Dogmatic people see skeptics as spreading dangerous uncertainty, and skeptics see dogmatists as living in an illusory world of false certainty. Each fears the other. Dogmatic opinions are often very conventional, that is, they are at the A or B end of the scale that you assessed in Section 1.2. But this is not always the case. Someone with very firmly held but unusual opinions – for example people like those described in Section 1.2 as having alternative belief systems – can also be dogmatic. In particular, people who hold antireligious views often hold them just as dogmatically as those of deep but narrow religious faith.

Most people's opinions lie between dogmatism and skepticism. To see where between these extremes your opinions lie, record your reactions to the claims listed below. Score your answers 1–4 as follows: 1 (no opinion, or don't know, or don't think there is an answer), 2 (tend to agree or tend to disagree), 3 (agree or disagree), 4 (strongly agree or strongly disagree).



- (a) There is a God.
- (b) Belief in anything supernatural is completely mistaken.
- (c) We survive death, in some form or other.
- (d) Doctors really know the causes of diseases.

- (e) Science and medicine are completely irrelevant to the really important things in life.
- (f) If you treat other people well then you will gain from it yourself.
- (g) There is an objective difference between right and wrong.
- (h) Morals are just made up by societies to make people behave in convenient ways.
- (i) Another culture whose beliefs about the relations between men and women are different from yours is just wrong about them.
- (j) When cosmologists make theories about the big bang they are discovering the truth about the origin of the universe.
- (k) If a psychologist persuades someone that they have a subconscious hatred of their mother, though the person had never felt any conscious hostility to her, then the psychologist has probably discovered a hidden feeling that the person had all along.
- (l) When different religions differ about what is necessary for salvation some of them are right and some are wrong.

First, add up your scores for (a), (b), (c), (l). Call this total R (for religion). Then add up your scores for (d), (e), (j), (k). Call this total S (for science). Finally, add up your scores for (f), (g), (h), (i). Call this third total M (for morals).

If your R score is 4–6, you are extremely skeptical about religious matters; if R is 6–8, you tend to skepticism about religion; if R is 10–12, you tend to be dogmatic, that is unskeptical, about religion; and if R is 12–16, you are extremely dogmatic about religion. (*Note: this scheme includes dogmatic atheists among those who are not skeptical about religion.*)

If your S score is 4–6, you are extremely skeptical about scientific matters; if S is 6–8, you tend to skepticism about science; if S is 10–12, you tend to be dogmatic, that is unskeptical, about science; and if S is 12–16, you are extremely dogmatic about science.

If your M score is 4–6, you are extremely skeptical about moral matters; if M is 6–8, you tend to skepticism about morals; if M is 10–12, you tend to be dogmatic, that is unskeptical, about morals; and if M is 12–16, you are extremely dogmatic about morals.

Now look for correlations with the scores of others taking the questionnaire. Are those who are skeptical about religion generally skeptical or dogmatic about science? Are those who are dogmatic about science generally skeptical or dogmatic about morals? Why might this be?

Note that this classification of attitudes as skeptical or dogmatic is pretty superficial. Later we will see much more subtle classifications. But note also that these attitudes are not just fixed aspects of people's characters. It is central to the enterprise of philosophy to understand that skepticism and dogmatism are things we can think and argue about. After some reflection and discussion – after doing some philosophy – someone may become more or less skeptical.

Biases

The questionnaire reveals some definite biases. Suppose that instead it had asked for your reactions to claims such as “Mice are smaller than elephants,” “Whales are fish,” “ $2 + 3 = 5$,” and “Wood is a metal.” Almost everyone would score these 4, “strongly agree or strongly disagree,” and so almost everyone would come out as very dogmatic and unskeptical. So the selection of questions reflects biases about the topics where we really might gain by more thinking or considering more evidence. These biases could be wrong, but they would be generally shared by contemporary philosophers.

1.12 Moral Skepticism

Beliefs about right and wrong are among the beliefs that can be doubted. We can be dogmatic or skeptical about moral beliefs. And if we are skeptical we can have vulgar, careful, or philosophical doubt about them. If someone says “I think I should go to the party tonight,” and someone replies “I doubt that; you promised that you would stay home and write a letter to your grandmother,” then this is vulgar doubt. The first and second person share moral beliefs but disagree about what to do in this particular case. Then there is a careful doubt about whether we should consider something wrong. Thus people can debate about whether capital punishment, or smoking marijuana, or insider trading are wrong. These are very different cases, but with all of them people are likely to agree that there are some moral principles but disagree about what they are. And then there is philosophical doubt applied to right and wrong, in which someone seriously questions whether any moral principles can be right.

There are some moral beliefs that most of us just cannot make ourselves doubt. For example, consider your attitude to a group of soldiers who kill thousands of innocent noncombatants. (Perhaps they wipe out the inhabitants of a peaceful village, just for fun.) Imagine that you see television footage of harmless old people and children being hunted down and butchered: would you be able to suppress a reaction of horror, outrage, and moral condemnation?

That is not to say that philosophical doubt is impossible here. Although most of us cannot help believing that it is wrong to murder innocent people, we are capable of looking for the reasons for our belief in the wrongness of murders, and then of asking hard questions about the nature of those reasons.

What kinds of doubt we can have for different moral beliefs tends to be related to what the beliefs are about. For our thoughts about right and wrong concern most of our lives, so we have moral beliefs about all the very different kinds of things we do. Here is one simple classification of them. We can have moral beliefs about four general topics.

Personal relations We praise and condemn people for the way they run their emotional and family lives, and the way they treat their friends. Societies have rules about sex.

Some moral rules seem to be arbitrary conventions. But there are actions which it is almost impossible not to feel are deeply wrong.

Economic life Stealing is usually condemned, and business people have to be able to trust one another.

Life, death, pain There are things that we hesitate to do to one another. In particular, killing and causing pain are usually taken to be wrong.

The environment People assume a responsibility for the world around them. This gives them a concern with the welfare of other species, the appearance of cities and landscape, and the future state of the whole planet.

People often have rather different attitudes to moral beliefs about these four areas. Many people consider moral principles about personal relations to be somewhat arbitrary devices. They think that societies invent rules about family life and about sex whose purpose is just to make social life run smoothly. (Other people give a much more profound significance to some of these moral rules, for example, those concerning marriage or sexuality.) The situation is rather the same for beliefs about the morality of economic life. It is not too hard to think of many of them as arbitrary conventions. Doubting them, in this case, can consist in imagining how different conventions might be adopted in a different society. Most people, though, take the moral prohibition against stealing as a pretty serious matter.

On the other hand, skepticism about beliefs concerning life and death and the infliction of pain is much more difficult. Is torture wrong just because society will run more smoothly if we forbid it? It might be that society would run more smoothly if we were allowed, say, to torture criminal suspects to extract the truth from them. The repugnance most people feel to torture, murder, or rape feels as if it has a deeper origin, expressed in the intuition that there are things one just cannot do to another human being.

Beliefs about the environment are different from both beliefs about life and death and beliefs about personal relations. Many people think that our societies ought to have more, and more definite, principles about these matters. Yet we find the topic puzzling: why should we care about rare species of slug?

1.13 When is a Skeptic a Cynic?

A moral skeptic does not have to be a cynic. That is, a moral skeptic does not have to be someone who treats others as if no moral principles applied to his or her behavior. For philosophical skepticism about moral beliefs involves

questioning the reasons for those beliefs, and you can do this while still having them. You can ask why torture is wrong, and you can even think that none of the reasons that you can find as to why it might be wrong are very good ones – and yet remain convinced that torture is wrong.

Below there are descriptions of six situations in which a person expresses doubts about a moral belief. The people could be described in the following ways:

cynical: the person doubts that the moral belief expresses anything that truly limits his or her actions;

questioning: the person doubts that the moral belief is true, though other moral beliefs might be;

pathological: the person just does not understand what “ought,” “should,” and “right” mean;

philosophical: the person wants to find out what the reasons for the belief are, whether or not it is true.

- (a) Arthur is arguing with some friends about capital punishment. One friend expresses the view that people who commit crimes ought to be punished, whether or not this deters others from committing those crimes. Arthur says “I’m not so sure that there is any point to punishment for its own sake at all. Why when one person has suffered is the situation improved if another person also suffers?”
- (b) Betty is a cannibal. She was abandoned as a child and has lived for years in the woods by herself. Every now and then she ambushes a hiker and eats him. She is captured and in the few words that she remembers she protests that she wants to go back to the woods. When police and social workers explain that she cannot go back to eating people she just stares back in puzzlement.
- (c) Carina owns dozens of luxury apartments which she rents to rich people. She has found a way of deducting her own living expenses from the rent she gets, so that although she lives a very luxurious life she declares almost no income to the tax authorities. A friend protests that this is cheating, and she replies, “Those rules are for little boring people; if you have the imagination to find a way around the rules you deserve to get away with it.”
- (d) Daniel is studying anthropology, and has just learned about the variety of ways in which families and the relations between the sexes are organized in different cultures. He is faithful to his girlfriend but realizes that such a monogamous attitude would be seen as weird in many places. He asks “Why do I feel so strongly that promiscuity is wrong? I’m sure there must be some way in which the way we live is best.”
- (e) Eduardo is six years old. Another child pushes him off the slide at the playground. He runs after the child and punches him. Eduardo’s mother tells him off for hitting a smaller child who has not attacked him. “But he started it,” says Eduardo, “that’s a bad kid.”

- (f) Felicia is proud of her intelligence and independence of mind. She thinks that most people are stuck in ways of life that they have fallen into just because they cannot imagine anything different. So she goes around setting up situations in which people have to make awkward choices. She flirts with her friends' boyfriends to shake up her friends' relationships. She invites people to brunch when she knows they are planning to go to church. She notices every little white lie and questions to make the liar either admit to it or retreat into an even bigger falsehood. When the havoc she is causing is pointed out to her she says "No one should live without examining their motives, even if it is uncomfortable for them."

Which of these six people deserves which of these four labels? Some may deserve more than one of them. What moral beliefs are doubted by each of the people, and why?

What would Felicia say about Betty? In what ways are Betty and Eduardo similar? In what ways are Felicia and Carina different? Which of these people would you prefer to associate with in your own life? Are they the same as the ones that do not doubt your own convictions? Which of these people ought to be prevented from acting on their beliefs or lack of beliefs? Are they the same as the ones that do not doubt your own convictions?

1.14 Socratic Skepticism

Moral skeptics are often taken to be cynics. Doubt is equated with disbelief. The most famous victim of this was the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates, who lived from about 470 to 399 BC. In fact Socrates had a strong faith in an objective right and wrong. But his insistence that neither he nor any of his contemporaries had clear ideas about such things as virtue and justice, and his insistence on arguing for this conviction in public, were among the reasons why he was put to death.

Socrates' moral skepticism shows one way in which a philosopher can adopt a skeptical attitude to basic moral beliefs, including those which it is very hard to doubt. His method depends on the fact that when we express our moral beliefs we use words like "right," "wrong," "virtue," "justice," "fair," "unfair." But using a word is not the same as understanding it, nor the same as being able to explain what it means. Socrates argued that we usually do not know what these moral words mean. So, according to Socrates, we are not capable of defending our beliefs about, for example, justice, since we do not know what justice is.

Socrates' way of arguing usually went like this: he would first demand to be given a clear and general definition of the moral ideas in question ("virtue," "justice," or whatever). Other people would then propose definitions and he

would attack these definitions, showing that they did not really define the concept in question. He would then conclude that we do not really know what virtue or justice is. (This strategy is clearest in the dialogue *Meno*, discussed below.)

At the heart of his skeptical arguments was an important realization. We may label it *Socrates' discovery*: often we cannot define ideas that are essential to beliefs we feel certain about. This discovery lies behind arguments such as the following:

Socratic skeptical argument: first version

We cannot define virtue.

Therefore we do not know what virtue is.

Therefore we do not know which acts are virtuous.

(The argument uses the word “virtue,” because that is the one discussed in Plato’s *Meno*. But “rights,” “justice,” or many other moral, or non-moral, terms would do as well.)

How convincing is this? It is not at all obvious that you don’t know what virtue is just because you cannot define it. (Do you know what a saxophone sounds like? Can you define what a saxophone sounds like?) But taken as an explanation of a kind of skeptical position it is more convincing. Suppose that our ideas about right and wrong, justice and injustice, were radically mistaken. In order to see that they were mistaken we would have to see what right and wrong, justice and injustice really were. It would not be enough just to have convictions that we express by using the words “right,” “wrong,” “just,” “unjust.” But we could never do this, Socrates would argue, if we could not even define the terms. So we can rephrase the argument as follows:

Socratic skeptical argument: second version

We cannot define virtue.

If we were mistaken about virtue we could never realize it unless we could define virtue.

Therefore we do not know that we are not mistaken about which acts are virtuous.

It is clearer from this version of the argument that it expresses philosophical skepticism rather than moral cynicism. But the way Socrates expressed himself is more like the first version than the second version. That makes it less surprising that he was put to death.

The philosopher Plato was a pupil of Socrates. He immortalized his teacher in a series of dialogues in which Socrates appears as a wise and ever-questioning seeker after truth. (A dialogue is discussion in which two or more people

consider each other's views.) A typical early dialogue is the *Meno*. In it Socrates is discussing with a younger man, Meno, whether virtue can be taught. ("Virtue" means for them roughly "the capacity to do the right thing in public life." The concept is similar to that of being excellent or admirable. Some of Socrates' contemporaries claimed to be able to teach it.) Socrates persuades Meno that first they must know what virtue is. Meno proposes several definitions, which Socrates shoots down, usually by showing that they don't define virtue but only some special kind of virtue. Socrates claims that we do have real definitions of mathematical ideas, and gives a famous theory, involving the soul's existence before birth, to show how this could be. But we don't have anything like this kind of knowledge in ethics. Therefore, Socrates concludes, people who happen to be good and wise leaders aren't really acting from knowledge. Instead they have an intuitive knack that gives them true opinions in many particular cases.

(This is only one of the lines of argument found in the *Meno*. The dialogue is rich with ideas. Besides the themes that virtue cannot be defined or taught, Plato also argues for four other ideas that have proved very influential in later philosophy. One idea is that anyone, whatever their background or intelligence, can understand mathematics if they think carefully and intelligently about it. Another is that we understand abstract concepts like those found in mathematics or ethics because we met them in a spiritual existence before birth. A third is that no one ever does a wrong action knowingly: evil is always the result of mistaking what is actually bad for what is good. And the fourth is that knowing something is more than simply having a correct belief about it. Some of Plato's ideas are discussed further in Chapter 4, Section 4)

Here is one passage from the *Meno*, where Socrates has persuaded Meno to give a definition of virtue. Dots (. . .) indicate where some of the text has been left out.

Socrates: . . . Do you claim that virtue is the power of acquiring good things?

Meno: Yes

Socrates: And by "good" do you mean such things as health and wealth?

Meno: I include acquiring both money and high government positions. . . .

Socrates: . . . Don't you want to add "just and righteous" to the word "acquisition" in your definition? Would you call it virtue even if wealth or power are unjustly acquired?

Meno: Certainly not.

Socrates: So, when acquiring wealth or power is virtuous, justice or self-control or piety . . . must be part of the story. Otherwise, although it is a means to good things, it will not be virtue.

Meno: No, how could you have virtue without these?

Socrates: In fact if you are poor because you didn't get money unjustly then your poverty is actually virtuous.

Meno: It would seem so.

Socrates: Then to have such goods is no more virtue than to lack them.

Which of the following is the best description of the main conclusion of this passage, the point that Socrates is most trying to make?

- ◆ Virtue is not simply getting wealth and power.
- ◆ Meno's definition of virtue as the power of getting good things is wrong.
- ◆ Unjustly acquired wealth is not a good thing.
- ◆ It is as virtuous to be poor as to be rich.



Suppose Plato was right that virtue cannot be defined. Would it follow that we do not know what virtue is? Consider the following arguments. In what ways are they similar to or different from the Socratic skeptical argument?

Romeo cannot define the sound of a saxophone.

Therefore he does not know what a saxophone sounds like.

Juliet cannot define love.

Therefore she does not know what love is.

(For more about premises, conclusions, and arguments see Chapter 2, Sections 3 to 6, and Chapter 5, Sections 4 to 6.)

Conclusions of This Chapter

- ◆ *To understand patterns of thinking we have to consider how we might doubt our beliefs.*
- ◆ *To doubt a belief is not to be sure that it is wrong.*
- ◆ *Skepticism about moral beliefs does not have to mean being cynical about life or human relations.*
- ◆ *Sometimes when we see how we might doubt our beliefs we learn that we do not really understand what it is that we believe.*

Further Reading

Books or book chapters that can take you further into the issues discussed in this chapter are listed below. The easier ones are listed first, on each topic. *More difficult* reading is marked with an asterisk (*).

The publication or other details are the most well-known or most suitable editions of the work. You may find that your library or bookstore has other editions; these will probably be fine.

Reasons for belief

Chapter 1 of Martin Hollis, *Invitation to Philosophy*. Blackwell, 1985.

Chapter 1 of Willard Quine and Joseph Ullian, *The Web of Belief*. Random House, 1978.

Chapter 1 of Adam Morton, *A Guide through the Theory of Knowledge*, third edition. Blackwell, 2002.

Plato and Socrates

Plato, *Meno*, in *Collected Dialogues of Plato*, edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns. Pantheon Books, 1961.

*Gregory Vlastos (ed.), *The Philosophy of Socrates*. Macmillan, 1972.

Plato, "Innate Knowledge" (selection from *Meno*) in John Cottingham (ed.), *Western Philosophy: An Anthology*. Blackwell, 1996.

Electronic resources

Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy (available online at many universities): articles on Doubt, Plato, Socrates.

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<http://plato.stanford.edu/>): *Skepticism, moral*.