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A refutation of global scepticism

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Various possibilities, that one is dreaming, that one is being deceived by a deceitful demon, that one is a brain in the vat being stimulated to think one has a body and is in a regular world, have been invoked to show that all one's experience-based beliefs might be false. Descartes in Meditation I advises that in order not to lapse into his careless everyday view of things he, or at least his meditator, should pretend that all his experience-based beliefs, indeed all his 'habitual opinions', are 'utterly false and imaginary'. What is taken for granted by Descartes' pretence, and is allegedly demonstrated by the sceptical scenarios mentioned above, is that it is logically possible that all one's experience-based beliefs are false.¹ But for a typical agent this is simply

1 Descartes was presumably aware that it is not really possible that all one's habitual opinions are false. Similarly, Descartes was presumably aware that it is not really possible to be asleep and dreaming if one does not have a body. However, he does seem to have believed that, even granting the probity of deductive arguments, knowledge of God's existence and his benevolence are needed to unequivocally rule out the possibility that all one's sensory beliefs are false. As demonstrated below, less than that is needed to demonstrate the impossibility of all one's sensory beliefs being false.

not possible. To give a mundane example: on the basis of my sensory experience I believe the following two claims:

- (1) I have a hand
and
- (2) It is not the case that I have a hand with a wart on it.

Now it is not possible that both these claims are false. The negations of (1) and (2) are jointly inconsistent. So, necessarily, at least one of (1) and (2) is true. So, it is not possible that all my experience-based beliefs are false. So, contra the widely accepted view, the possibilities that one is dreaming, or is being deceived by a deceitful demon, or is a brain in the vat, do not show that it is possible that all one's experience-based beliefs are false.²

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- 2 Of course this proof does not demonstrate any incoherence in the sceptical possibility that any single experience-based belief is false. Indeed, allowing that we can make sense of the notion of a positive belief such that (1), but not (2), counts as a positive belief, it does not show that global scepticism concerning all one's positive beliefs based on experience is incoherent.

What's wrong with possibilism

CHRISTOPHER WOODARD

1. Possibilists claim that what Smith ought to do now depends on two kinds of fact about relevant agents' responses to his action. If the relevant agent is a different individual, what Smith ought to do now depends on how that agent would respond. If the relevant agent is Smith himself, it depends instead on how he could best respond. Actualists deny this. They claim that, whether or not the relevant agent is Smith himself, what matters is how that agent would respond to the various things Smith could do now (Zimmerman 1996: ch. 6).