REASON AND SCEPTICISM
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REASON AND SCEPTICISM

MICHAEL A SLOTE
An admirable statement of the aims of the Library of Philosophy was provided by the first editor, the late Professor J. H. Muirhead, in his description of the original programme printed in Erdmann's *History of Philosophy* under the date 1890. This was slightly modified in subsequent volumes to take the form of the following statement:

'The Muirhead Library of Philosophy was designed as a contribution to the History of Modern Philosophy under the heads: first of Different Schools of Thought—Sensationalist, Realist, Idealist, Intuitivist; secondly of different Subjects—Psychology, Ethics, Aesthetics, Political Philosophy, Theology. While much had been done in England in tracing the course of evolution in nature, history, economics, morals and religion, little had been done in tracing the development of thought on these subjects. Yet "the evolution of opinion is part of the whole evolution".

'By the co-operation of different writers in carrying out this plan it was hoped that a thoroughness and completeness of treatment, otherwise unattainable, might be secured. It was believed also that from writers mainly British and American fuller consideration of English Philosophy than it had hitherto received might be looked for. In the earlier series of books containing, among others, Bosanquet's *History of Aesthetic*, Pfleiderer's *Rational Theology since Kant*, Albee's *History of English Utilitarianism*, Bonar's *Philosophy and Political Economy*, Brett's *History of Psychology*, Ritchie's *Natural Rights*, these objects were to a large extent effected.

'In the meantime original work of a high order was being produced both in England and America by such writers as Bradley, Stout, Bertrand Russell, Baldwin, Urban, Montague, and others, and a new interest in foreign works, German, French and Italian, which had either become classical or were attracting public attention, had developed. The scope of the Library thus became extended into something more international, and it is entering on the fifth decade of its existence in the hope that it may contribute to that mutual understanding between countries which is so pressing a need of the present time.'

The need which Professor Muirhead stressed is no less pressing today, and few will deny that philosophy has much to do with enabling us to meet it, although no one, least of all Muirhead himself, would regard that as the sole, or even the main, object of philosophy. As Professor Muirhead continues to lend the distinction of his name to the
Library of Philosophy it seemed not inappropriate to allow him to recall us to these aims in his own words. The emphasis on the history of thought also seemed to me very timely: and the number of important works promised for the Library in the very near future augur well for the continued fulfilment, in this and other ways, of the expectations of the original editor.

H. D. LEWIS
REASON AND SCEPTICISM

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The present work is chiefly concerned with the task of overcoming certain forms of scepticism that have plagued and perplexed philosophers throughout the ages. The focus is on epistemological scepticism; scepticism about moral knowledge or about human freedom, for example, are ignored altogether. My own earliest interests in the area of epistemological scepticism centred around the problem of the external world, and arose from the conviction that previous attempts to refute scepticism about the external world were one and all inadequate. Interest in the other forms of scepticism dealt with in this book—in the problem of other minds, in Goodman's New Riddle of Induction, and in the problem of the existence of God, for example—developed in the course of attempts to deal with the problem of the external world.

Certain portions of this book contain previously published material. I am indebted to the editor of the Review of Metaphysics for permission to include parts of 'Induction and Other Minds' (XX, 1966) in the first two sections of Chapter 4; to the editor of Analysis for permission to use 'Some Thoughts on Goodman's Riddle' (27, 1967) and 'A General Solution to Goodman's Riddle?' (29, 1968) in the second section of Chapter 5; and to the editor of the American Philosophical Quarterly for permission to use a much-expanded version of 'Religion, Science, and the Extraordinary' (American Philosophical Quarterly Monograph No. 4) in Chapter 6.

I wish to thank the Columbia University Council on Research in the Humanities for a grant which enabled me to devote myself entirely to the present work during the summer of 1967; and also to thank the Columbia Philosophy Department for providing secretarial assistance in typing the final draft of my manuscript. Those to whom I am indebted for helpful comments and criticisms concerning various parts of this book include: George Boolos, Morris Lazerowitz, David Levin, Sidney Morgenbesser, Ernest Nagel, John O'Connor, Alvin Plantinga, Margaret Wilson, and Robert Wolff. I am particularly grateful to Professor H. D. Lewis for both philosophical and editorial counsel, and to Toni Vogel for aid in preparing the indexes. Bernard Berofsky, David Lewis, Sydney Shoemaker, and Michael Stocker read one or another complete draft of the present work, and saved me from numerous errors and unclarities. I am also greatly indebted to Robert Shope
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MICHAEL A. SLOTE
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INTRODUCTION

What reason or justification is there for thinking that there really is an external (physical) world? What reason or justification is there for thinking that there is not, instead, an immaterial demon who deceptively makes it appear to us as if there were real physical objects? What reason is there for thinking that we are not always dreaming, that we ever perceive or remember things correctly, that the humanoid bodies there appear to be around us are the bodies of conscious beings, or that any sort of God at all exists? Questions like these have been raised by philosophers of all kinds over the centuries.

Some philosophers have been, or have claimed to be, sceptical about the possibility of our having or giving good reasons for believing one or another of the above things. There are many kinds of epistemological sceptics and many kinds of epistemological scepticism. There is scepticism about the external (physical) world, about perception, about memory, about other minds, about God, etc. What I shall mean in talking about scepticism about the external world, or about any other matter, can be understood in terms of the notion of a sceptical hypothesis. I shall, in general, call something a sceptical hypothesis about $x$ if it entails the non-existence of $x$.\(^1\) Thus the hypothesis that there is a demon who makes it seem as if there is an external world when in fact there is none is a sceptical hypothesis about (the existence of) the external world. By scepticism about $x$ I shall (unless I indicate otherwise) mean the claim or view that some sceptical hypothesis about $x$ is no less reasonable than its denial, which means that there is no more reason to believe that $x$ exists than that $x$ does not exist and that it is, consequently, unreasonable to believe that $x$ exists. Scepticism about the external world, then, is the view that (a) some sceptical hypothesis about the external world is no less reasonable than the claim that there is an external world, and that consequently (b) it is unreasonable to believe in an external world.

The sceptical problems I shall be dealing with here are several and diverse. Each of them can be dealt with in isolation and has

\(^1\) I am allowing myself the notions of (logical) entailment and logical possibility (and allied notions) without attempting to defend the legitimacy of using them in the light of the recent work of Quine, and others. I think it is legitimate to use these notions in philosophy, but shall not argue the point here.
been dealt with in isolation by other philosophers. However, a large number of philosophers have thought that the various sorts of scepticism I have alluded to above have much in common. And many of these have thought, in particular, that if one is to overcome scepticism about the external world, memory, other minds, etc., one can do so only on the basis of one’s knowledge (or one’s reasonable beliefs) about the nature of one’s own experience, supplemented by certain valid ‘principles of inference’. In the present work, I shall attempt to overcome some of the major traditional forms of epistemological scepticism by showing the reasonableness of belief in an external (physical) world, in the existence of veridical memory and perception of that world, in the existence of other minds, and in the existence of objects that one is not observing, on the basis of a single line of argument based chiefly on premises solely about my experience\(^1\) and on certain valid principles of scientific methodology and of rational thinking in general. I hope to show that, given the sort of experience each of us (has reason to believe he) has, each of us can make use of intuitively reasonable principles of inference to show that the best (scientific) explanation of his having the sort of experiences he does is to be found in the ‘hypothesis’ of an external world that is pretty much the way it seems to be and to have been. From this conclusion—I hope to show—he can argue for the reasonableness of belief in other conscious beings and in objects that he is not currently perceiving and for there being at least some reason to believe in some sort of deity.

In recent years philosophers have objected in many different ways to the sort of enterprise on which I am proposing to embark.\(^2\)

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\(^1\) Premises solely about my experience are premises that describe my experience and that entail that I am conscious or aware in some way or other, but that do not entail the existence of physical entities or of conscious beings other than myself. Also, premises (or beliefs) about the external world (or about other minds) are ones whose truth entails that there is an external world (or minds other than one’s own).

\(^2\) As may already be apparent, this book will involve thought and argument from two different points of view. The first is that of the philosopher who assumes the existence of a community of other philosophers and accepts a large number of (what seem to him) reasonable commonsense, philosophic and scientific beliefs. It is from this point of view that I shall try to show the validity and importance of the enterprise of the present book and the weakness of other attempts to overcome scepticism of various kinds. The second point of view is that of the conscious being who argues from the nature of his experience, via certain principles, but without begging any questions, in an attempt to show the falsity of various forms of scepticism. For purposes of easy exposition the two
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Most significantly, perhaps, some philosophers would object to the whole idea of arguing for the external world and for other minds on the basis of claims about experience. Such an enterprise, they would say, presupposes that our beliefs about our own experiences are in some sense epistemologically prior to our beliefs about external objects and other minds. And the traditional argument for such priority has been that statements solely about our own experience are certain and incorrigible and indubitable in a way that statements about the external world or other minds are not. Certain contemporary philosophers, notable among them the late John Austin,¹ have thought that statements about immediate experience are neither incorrigible nor indubitable, and have believed, further, that if such statements are certain, so too are statements that entail the existence of an external (physical) world. I am inclined to agree with Austin and others that statements about experience are not incorrigible, nor indubitable, inasmuch as it is possible for someone to make a genuine mistake, and have reason for thinking that (or wondering whether) he has made such a mistake, about the character of his own (present) experience. But I am not at all sure that if statements about immediate experience are certain, statements about the external world are (at least sometimes) certain. I have argued the point elsewhere,² and shall not discuss it further here, since the argument of the present book in no way depends, I think, on the possibility of certainty about our immediate experience or on the impossibility of having certainty about the existence and nature of the external world and/or other minds.

In claiming that my experience is a datum that calls for an explanation and enables us to justify belief in an external world, etc., I am not claiming that it is certain that I have the sorts of experiences I think I have. For it is common scientific practice to seek for explanations of data that are themselves not (considered to be) certain—as long as there is strong reason to believe in the exis-

tence of those data. Thus an astronomer may seek to explain an increase in the brightness of a certain star that he believes has taken place in terms of the occurrence of some sort of nuclear reaction in the centre of the star, without wanting to claim that he knows for certain that the star's brightness has increased. He may be willing to grant the possibility that his telescope, his eyes, or his other instruments have been defective, and merely claim that there is very good reason to think the star’s brightness has increased, that a nuclear reaction in the centre of the star is the most probable cause of such an increase in brightness, if it occurred, and that it is, therefore, in the circumstances, reasonable to believe (at least tentatively) that a nuclear reaction in fact did occur in the centre of the star in question.

All I wish to maintain, similarly, is that we can, for certain purposes of epistemological reconstruction, assume (the reasonableness of belief in) the truth of our beliefs about the nature of our experience. Even if such beliefs are corrigible, dubitable and not (absolutely) certain, it is entirely reasonable for us to accept them. And if one can show that the best explanation of the ‘data’ constituted by the sort of experiences one has involves ‘positing’ an external world, that is pretty much as it seems, then one has done a major part of what is required in order to show the reasonableness of belief in an external world, other minds, etc.

It will be replied by certain philosophers that, if I am willing to grant that statements of beliefs about immediate experience are not certain, I have in no way provided a plausible basis for the claim that beliefs (or knowledge) about our own experience are epistemologically prior to beliefs (or knowledge) about the external world, other minds, etc., etc. And if such beliefs are not prior, why is it necessary to argue from them to claims about the external world? Why can’t one just assume that there is a world, that other people exist, and forget about proving or arguing for these things?

Of course, I would never want to claim that there is anything necessary about attempting to overcome scepticism about the external world, etc. Ordinary people seem to get on quite well without knowing anything about such scepticism, much less trying to deal with it philosophically. And obviously there are enough other worthwhile areas and aspects of philosophy that not even the philosopher who wants to make a genuine contribution will have to spend much time thinking about and arguing against scepticism. But I do believe that attempting to overcome scepti-
cism via a reconstruction of knowledge of the kind to be attempted here is interesting and philosophically worth while, and it is worth considering how such a belief can be defended against the above objections.

In the first place, it is not at all clear to me that one cannot plausibly argue for the priority of claims about immediate experience (claims solely about one's experience) with respect to claims about external objects and other minds, even if such claims are granted to be corrigible, dubitable and only sometimes (or never) absolutely certain. For, surely, most philosophers would be willing to admit that if there is a type of proposition or claim $x$ and a type of proposition or claim $y$ such that it is logically impossible for it to be reasonable for one to believe in (the truth of) some propositions (or claims) of kind $y$ without its being reasonable for one to believe in (the truth of) some propositions (or claims) of kind $x$, but not vice versa, then propositions (or claims) of kind $x$ are in a significant way epistemologically prior to those of kind $y$.\(^1\)

And this is, I think, exactly the situation with claims about one's own immediate experience and claims about the external world. It is not logically impossible to be warranted\(^2\) in believing propositions solely about one's own experience(s) without being warranted in believing any propositions about external objects (or processes, etc.). This could happen, for example, if there were an intelligent being possessed of the sort of concepts we possess whose (sense) experience was so thoroughly disordered that he could not make any reasonable claims about the nature, or even the existence, of an external world although he had reasonable beliefs about his experiences. (By 'external world' I have meant and shall continue to mean 'physical world'. There is a physical world even if just one's own body exists.) There might also be a case where one's (sense) experience was to some degree orderly, but such as to

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\(^1\) Those who are suspicious or wary of (positing) propositions can, I think, rephrase my talk of the epistemological priority of types of propositions so as to speak only of the priority of beliefs. By 'some propositions' I mean 'at least one proposition'.

\(^2\) I shall use 'reasonable', 'justified', and 'warranted' fairly interchangeably (in application to beliefs, etc.), because I think they mean pretty much the same thing (in such contexts). By 'justified belief' philosophers sometimes mean 'belief that can be or has been justified' and sometimes mean 'reasonable belief', but (unless the context makes it clear to the contrary) I shall always use 'justified belief' in the latter sense. Unless it is otherwise stated, I shall use 'justified', etc. to mean 'rationally justified' or 'epistemically justified', etc. On this see Chapter 2, p. 85 ff., below.
warrant one's believing that the sole source of one's experience was a Cartesian demon or spirit and that there was no external world. (I shall have more to say about such a case below, p. 61f., and p. 69f.) On the other hand, without its being reasonable to have some sort of belief about the nature of one's immediate experience, how could one (logically) possibly have good reason to believe (be warranted in believing) any claims entailing the existence of an external world? Of course, to ask in dubious tones how something could be the case is not to show that the thing in question is impossible. But if one examines the matter carefully, one will, I think, be hard put to find a conceivable case where believing in an external world is reasonable for someone for whom no claim (or belief or proposition) about his own experience is reasonable. Those inclined to favour a Coherence Theory of Knowledge (and of the Justification of Beliefs) might at this point claim that one could reasonably believe something about the external world without any belief or claim about experience being warranted for the being in question, if one had a belief about the external world, had no other beliefs or sets of beliefs contradicting that belief, and had no beliefs about one's experience. For according to some Coherence Theorists¹ any belief of a person that contradicts none of his other beliefs, nor any set of his other beliefs, is reasonable and warranted.

But is it so easy, first of all, to imagine someone's having beliefs about the external world but no beliefs about experience? Wasn't it really just because of the difficulty of this sort of thing that some Rationalists wrote of innate ideas as being virtually in the mind at birth (before one has had experience), rather than actually or really or fully in the mind at birth? More significant here, however, I think, is the sheer implausibility of the Coherence Theory's principle that beliefs are always warranted if they cohere with one's other beliefs (do not contradict any conjunction of such beliefs). For such a principle implies that a lunatic or paranoiac, whose beliefs about the plots that others are planning and perpetrating against him are coherent, is reasonable in believing the various things he does about the way people are plotting and acting against him. To put the issue in a slightly question-begging way, the Coherence Theory may deny the reasonableness of him

whose beliefs are only partly warped and out of touch with reality, but it affirms the reasonableness of the person whose beliefs are totally warped and out of touch with reality. I can see, then, no reason to think that one could have reasonable beliefs about the external world without having any reasonable beliefs about one’s immediate experience, just by having consistent beliefs about the former but not about the latter. The mere having of a belief (about the external world) does not ensure its reasonableness. It seems more plausible to imagine, rather, that if one is rationally justified in believing something about the external world, there is always something (that one has good reason to believe) about one’s experience that enables one to be thus justified (or, at least, without which this justification would not exist).\footnote{I am not claiming that knowledge of the external world is logically impossible without knowledge about experience. For someone might have innate knowledge about the external world without having had any experiences (and thus without having knowledge about his experiences), as has been pointed out by P. Unger (in ‘On Experience and the Development of the Understanding’, American Philosophical Quarterly 3, 1966, pp. 48–56), and by Don Locke (in Perception: London: Allen and Unwin, 1967, p. 207 n.). Locke, however, goes on to propose the following definition of epistemological priority: knowledge $x$ is prior to knowledge $y$ just in case it is logically impossible to have knowledge $y$, no knowledge $x$, and only normal human ways of knowing. But this definition leaves open the possibility that knowledge $x$ and knowledge $y$ be prior to each other, and it entails that knowledge $x$ is always prior to itself. To amend this, we must add to the definition: but it is logically possible to have knowledge $x$, no knowledge $y$ and only normal human ways of knowing. But on the definition thus amended, perhaps no important form of human knowledge is prior to any other. In particular, Locke may be mistaken in thinking, as he does, that knowledge about what we take ourselves to be perceiving is prior to knowledge about (perceived) material objects. For humans may well learn about physical objects (at least) as fast as they learn about their perceptual takings. (I am here assuming, as Locke does not, that learning and knowledge can exist in the absence of justified or reasonable belief. This view is (to my mind) successfully argued in Unger’s ‘Experience and Factual Knowledge’. J. Phil., 64, 1967, pp. 152–73.) Locke’s definition of priority does not make beliefs about experience clearly prior to beliefs about the external world, and so will not help us much in our attempt to justify our present enterprise.} We have every reason, I think, to hold that claims and beliefs about experience are epistemologically prior to claims and beliefs about the external world.

Note that I have spoken mainly of experience, not of sense experience. Many philosophers have thought it natural and correct to divide up our experiences into two kinds: sense (or outer) experiences and inner experiences. Thus Kant in the Critique of Pure Reason distinguishes inner and outer sense, and
in ‘Some Remarks on Sense Perception’,¹ Broad speaks of ‘ostensible perceptions’ as being separate and different from other sorts of experiences.² The philosophers who have wanted to make this sort of distinction with respect to experiences have usually thought that sense experiences are relevant to the verification and justification of claims about the external world, while inner experiences are not. In the Essay Concerning Human Understanding,³ for example, John Locke makes it clear that he thinks we can have evidence for or knowledge about external objects only by ‘sensation’. C. I. Lewis claims that the existence of objective (physical) realities ‘can be verified, or confirmed as probable, only by presentations of sense’.⁴ And, in the Zettel, Wittgenstein says that it is a ‘grammatical’ truth that our sensations (or sense experiences) can, but our emotions cannot, give us information about the external world.⁵ Many philosophers, then, have wanted to maintain the (presumably, logical) impossibility of evidence or justification for claims about the external world in the absence of (reasonably held beliefs that are solely about) sense experience. And many of them have concluded from this that beliefs (or knowledge) about immediate sense experiences are in an important way epistemologically prior to beliefs about the external world, and are, in consequence, the only sort of beliefs from which one can reasonably start in attempts to overcome scepticism and reconstruct human knowledge.

One problem about such a conclusion, of course, is the enormous difficulty of saying just what differentiates sense (or outer) experiences from inner-type experiences or of confidently sorting all kinds of experiences into one or the other of these two classes of experiences. One could try defining sense experiences as experiences that are (in some intentional sense) ‘of’ entities that seem to be in space or as experiences that (phenomenologically)

² Hume’s distinctions in the Treatise between impressions and ideas and between sensation and reflexion cut across the dichotomy we are considering. Neither ideas of sensation (e.g. memory images) nor impressions of reflexion (e.g. some emotions) always involve what most philosophers have wanted to call sense experience. (See the Treatise, Book I, Part I, section 3.)
³ Book IV, ch. 11.
⁴ Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation, Lasalle: Open Court, 1950, p. 203.
⁵ Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1967, pp. 84e and 87e. See also Broad’s ‘Berkeley’s Denial of Material Substance’, Phil. Review, 63, 1954, p. 175.
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seem to come from the outside or to be directed inward. On such definitions as these visual after-images and leg pains would seem to qualify as objects of sense experience or of outer experience.\(^1\) But it would still be difficult to classify headaches or certain vivid sorts of waking imaginings (or fantasies) either as inner or as outer experiences. Nonetheless, there does seem intuitively to be some difference between the conjuring up of images (or what have you) in one’s mind’s eye or ear and the having of thoughts and (non-bodily) emotions on the one hand, and seeming to see, hear, etc., things in space (whether in dreams, in hallucinations or in waking life) on the other.

Even granting the existence of such a distinction, however, it is by no means clear that beliefs about outer or sense experience(s) are epistemologically prior to beliefs about physical entities in the way so many philosophers have thought. For I think it is in fact logically possible that someone should have good reason to believe in the truth of certain claims about the external world, without being warranted in believing anything about his outer experience (i.e. anything entailing the existence of such outer experiences). Consider the case of a man (or other form of conscious being) who is constantly thinking to himself about various matters, but never has any sense experiences or any beliefs about such experiences. We can also consistently imagine that he has all (or a large number) of our ordinary material object concepts, but no actual beliefs entailing the existence of an external world. (Surely this is consistent, if an amnesiac can, as so often occurs, retain certain concepts while having forgotten whether there is anything to which they apply.) Imagine, further, that every time he hears the word ‘true’ faintly in his mind’s ear (or has a certain type of thought or emotion \(x\)), his proposed answers to any mathematical or other conceptual problems he is working on (in his head) and his current conjectures about the future course of his thoughts and various other matters he may be thinking of, turn out, in the end, to be correct in every detail. And every time he hears an inner ‘false’ (or has a certain type of thought or emotion \(y\)), his answers,

\(^1\) Actually, what have been called outer experiences are not always what one would clearly want to call sense experiences. The having of leg pains or of realistic dreams, for example. (However, Moore thinks it in order to speak of visual dream experiences as sensory experiences, and he may be right about this; see his ‘Certainty’, Philosophical Papers, London: Allen and Unwin, 1959, p. 248.) This fine distinction, however, can, I think, safely be ignored in our present discussion.
his predictions, and his other conjectures are gravely mistaken. Such a man might not know why the 'true' or 'false' occurred in his mind's ear when they did, but he would still, I think, after a while have good reason to trust those answers and conjectures accompanied by 'true' before checking them out. (Such a man would, I think, be a good example of someone with reasonable beliefs about experience but not about the external world.)

One day the man might begin to wonder about the existence and nature of the external world. He conjectures that there are (or may be) tables (or what have you) in the world, and hears an inner 'true'; when he conjectures that there are unicorns, he hears 'false'. And so on. Surely it would be at least somewhat reasonable for him then to believe in the existence of tables and the non-existence of unicorns. Of course, these beliefs differ greatly from mathematical and other beliefs; and he might wonder whether the 'true' and the 'false' might not be unreliable with respect to external-world conjectures, even though reliable with respect to mathematical and inner-experiential conjectures. But then again, mathematical conjectures are very different from experiential ones, and the 'true' and 'false' were accurate about both of these, so why not also about conjectures very different from either of these? Furthermore, the 'true' and 'false' might always give one consistent answers to one's conjectures if one repeated or varied them in certain ways; and one might, by relying on the 'true' and 'false' as means of learning and gaining warranted beliefs about the world, obtain a highly intricate and detailed, yet at the same time coherent, picture of what the external world was like. Surely in that case there would be good reason to believe those conjectures accompanied by 'true' and the negation of those conjectures accompanied by 'false'. (The fact that certain thoughts or emotions can be substituted for inner hearings of 'true' and 'false' without hurting our example shows that Locke and Wittgenstein were mistaken in holding, respectively, that inner thoughts and emotions can provide us with no information, or evidence for claims, about the nature of the external world.)

Thus it seems to be logically possible for one to have justification for belief in the existence of certain sorts of physical entities without having any justification for beliefs about sense experience. And philosophers have, it seems, been mistaken about the epistemological priority of beliefs about sense experience vis-à-vis beliefs about the external world. For many philosophers have
thought of the former sort of beliefs as prior to the latter sort in something like our above-defined sense of epistemological priority. What is epistemologically prior to the class of claims about the external world is the whole class of claims about one’s immediate experience. It is just a contingent fact that we humans need sense experiences in order to have reasonable beliefs about the external world. It is only a contingent fact that we are not able to justify believing in external realities in terms of the sort of argument which the being that we have imagined above could use. But given the sorts of inner and outer experiences we all have, any argument we could produce to justify our believing in external objects, processes, etc., will have to be based in some way on sense experiences, on assumptions about our sense experiences, or about our beliefs about the nature of our sense experiences, etc.

Another fairly common philosophical assumption has been that beliefs about the external world were prior to beliefs about other minds in something like our sense of ‘epistemologically prior’. Jonathan Bennett, for example, has claimed that judgments about other minds necessarily depend on judgments about other bodies for their justification.¹ Nor does the possibility of direct telepathic communication between minds show that one could have reasonable beliefs about other minds without reasonable beliefs about physical entities. For, as J. Shaffer points out in his ‘Persons and Their Bodies’, even if one is in telepathic communication with another mind, one may not have reason to believe that this is so unless one does some checking on the correlation of the contents of that mind with those of one’s own mind, and this would presumably involve justified beliefs about human bodies and/or other physical entities.²

A being without sense experiences of the kind described above, however, might have conjectured that there were other minds and have heard an inner ‘true’ and conjectured that there was an external world and have heard ‘false’, and in that case would he not have reason to believe in other minds without having reason to believe in an external world, and perhaps eventually very good reason to believe in other minds, if he were able by conjecturing and paying attention to his inner ‘true’s’ and ‘false’s’ to gain a detailed and coherent picture of what those other minds were like? (Also, as I mentioned earlier, a case may be possible in

which one has sense experiences and reason to think a demon—
another mind—has caused them and no good reason to believe in
an external world.) It would seem, then, that claims about the
physical are no more prior to claims about other minds, than
claims about one's own immediate sense experiences are prior to
either. It is only because of contingent facts about human experi-
ence (if it is the case at all) that we can justify claims about other
minds only on the basis of assumptions about human bodies. And
my own argument for other minds in Chapter 4 will proceed along
these very lines.

If what has been said above is correct, there is a perfectly
acceptable and historically important sense in which the class of
claims (solely) about one's own experience is epistemologically
prior to the class of claims about the external world and to the
class of claims about other minds (minds other than one's own).¹
And once it is clear that it is possible to have justification for claims
about one's own experiences (even sense experiences) without
justification for beliefs about the external world (or other minds),
the meaningfulness of scepticism becomes fairly obvious. For we
can ask whether (and what reason there is for thinking) this possi-
bility is not in fact the case with us who have the sort of experi-
ence we do. And if this sort of question is meaningful, then
scepticism about the external world (or other minds) and attempts
to refute or overcome such scepticism cannot just be dismissed
as philosophically unimportant and uninteresting. Even if we have
reason—good reason—to believe in the external world and other
minds, rather than in any sceptical hypotheses about the external
world or other minds, and even if we know and have excellent
reason to believe that such good reason exists without having to
do any philosophy, we may still be curious to see explicitly stated
exactly what those good reasons, say, for believing in an external
world rather than in a demon, are. Inasmuch as one purpose of
philosophy is to seek self-conscious knowledge of things that
ordinary people just take for granted or know only in an intuitive,

¹ I should like to add, furthermore, that in talking of one class (or type) of
claims being prior to another, certain restrictions should be understood as
holding on what is to count as a class or type of claim(s). To avoid certain
possible confusions, the claims made by Lyndon Johnson are not to constitute a
possible class or type of claim(s). I think we can eliminate such unnatural 'types'
of claims by stipulating that $k$ is to count as a class or type of claim only if the
claims of type $k$ could not (logically) be claims that were not claims of type $k$.
Claims made by Lyndon Johnson might have been claims not made by Johnson,
and so do not constitute a class or type of claim(s) in my terminology.
inarticulate way, an attempt to state exactly what (good) reasons there are for someone with our sort of (sense) experiences to believe in an external world (rather than a demon), etc., recommends itself as a philosophically worthwhile—even to someone—who is not a sceptic and who believes most of what common sense tells him. Even if one believes (and thinks one has reason to believe) that there is something wrong with external-world or other-minds scepticism, it may be a philosophically important task to show that something is wrong with such scepticism and to show what is wrong with it.

It is my belief, further, that one can grant to such critics of traditional attempts to reconstruct knowledge as Austin that one can support some physical object statements by others (without having to bring in statements about experience),\(^1\) that statements about immediate experience are not as a class incorrigible or indubitable and, perhaps, even that physical object statements can be certain, without having to grant them that such reconstructions of knowledge are philosophically insignificant. And this for reasons just mentioned. Of course, if the statements or claims about immediate experience with which one starts are not incorrigible or indubitable, then some sceptic might question those premises, and thereby question our argument against scepticism about the external world and other minds. But it hardly follows that attempting to argue against scepticism on the basis of dubitable (but not necessarily unwarranted) assumptions about experience is philosophically unimportant or jejune. Why should we not try to reduce scepticism about the external world and other minds to scepticism about experience (and about certain principles of inference)? We may be less moved or disturbed by scepticism about experience than by scepticism about the external world, and so be interested in seeing how or whether one can justify beliefs about the external world in terms of assumptions about experience.

I am inclined to think, furthermore, that one does not even need to hold that claims about one's own experience are epistemologically prior to claims about the external world, etc., in order to recommend the enterprise on which we are embarking. For if we are scientifically-minded, we wish to explain the existence and nature of the various sorts of things that there are. But, then, why should one not be interested in explaining the fact that we have the

\(^1\) See Austin, op. cit., p. 116 f.
sort of experience we do? And as soon as one considers it worthwhile to seek such an explanation, scepticism and attempting to overcome scepticism become important; for on the face of it, it seems hard to rule out *ab initio* the possibility that our experience is to be explained in terms of the action of a non-material, non-physical, demon; so if one wants to *show* that the best explanation of our experience is that it comes from (is caused by) objects, processes, or events, in an external world, one has to show something wrong or incoherent with the hypothesis of a demon. And this we shall be attempting here.

The problem of the external world is an old one, but many philosophers today do not take it seriously. And yet these same philosophers often profess to believe that science and scientific reason (or methodology) are the ultimate test of the belief-worthiness of an hypothesis, and that only scientifically plausible or reasonable hypotheses are hypotheses worthy of credence. It seems odd, then, that such philosophers do not take scepticism about the external world seriously, since no one has ever, as far as I know, produced a satisfactory argument to show that the external world provides a better explanation of the existence and nature of the experiences of each of us than does the demon, better either by scientific or by other rational standards for the evaluation of explanatory hypotheses. For many such philosophers (as well as many scientists) would hold that if one cannot show (or give some reason for thinking) that some explanation *e* of a phenomenon *p* is better than certain other explanations of *p* that are incompatible with *e*, it is scientifically premature and unreasonable to believe *e*. Such philosophers, then, ought to encourage and seek the completion of an enterprise like our own, because only by means of such an enterprise will they be able to reconcile their belief in an external world with their conviction that one should be scientific about accepting hypotheses and that one is being unscientific if one accepts as the explanation of a phenomenon a hypothesis that one can give no reason for thinking superior to certain other explanations of that phenomenon. And this is true regardless of whether claims or propositions about immediate experience are as a class prior to claims or propositions about the external world as a class, in the sense of priority defined above.

It might be claimed, however, that if one has in fact already *accepted* a certain explanation of a phenomenon and nothing definite has been found wrong with it, then it is scientifically
reasonable to continue to accept it, even though one cannot show it in any way to be superior to certain newly proposed alternatives to it, because of the validity of some sort of Principle of Scientific 'Conservatism'. If so, accepting the external world might be scientifically reasonable even though one could not fault the hypothesis of the demon. All this may be so; but even if it is, a scientist *qua* scientist would surely rather be able to show something to be wrong with alternatives to his own explanation of a phenomenon than have to justify his adherence to his own explanation by appealing to the length of tenure of that explanation, to the fact that it was accepted before its alternatives were thought up or seriously considered. And so even an adherent of the Principle of Conservatism who already believed in some sort of external world as providing the best explanation of his experiences would have reason *as a scientist* to want to be able to find fault with sceptical hypothesis like that of the demon, and thus to encourage the enterprise of the present work, which seeks to provide him with the means to do just that. Furthermore, one would as an epistemologist prefer to be able to show the scientific superiority of the hypothesis of an external world not only to someone who already believed in such a world, but also to someone who had suspended belief in such matters until he could find reason to believe in the external world rather than in a demon. That is, we want an argument that will have some force against the sceptic. And we could not produce such an argument, if we argued from the Principle of Conservatism. For then our argument would assume as one of its premises that one already believed in an external world, and, of course, this is precisely not true of the sceptic. And so to overcome scepticism about the external world, we cannot use the Principle of Conservatism, and so must look elsewhere for scientific methodological principles to fulfil the goal of the present work. (Nor, in addition, can we use any assumptions entailing the existence of beliefs in an external world, in order to argue against the external-world sceptic.)

Of course, there have been many previous attempts by philosophers to overcome scepticism about the external world, veridical memory and perception, other minds, etc. Some of these involved trying to discredit various forms of scepticism by showing them to be self-contradictory or incoherent in one way or another. We shall consider some such attempts in Chapter 1 below. Others have sought to overcome scepticism on its own terms, have granted
the force and coherence of sceptical doubt and gone on to try to provide reasons for believing those things that can be sceptically doubted. Most notable of these philosophers, of course, was Descartes. Descartes, in the *Meditations*, attempted not only to start from a *single* indubitable premise, but to prove the *existence* of the external world, not just the *reasonableness* of the claim that it exists. But for all its boldness, philosophers have long recognized the failure of his enterprise. For it is not at all clear that he relies on only one, indubitable premise, and his argument for the external world rests on a clearly unsound argument for God’s existence.

More recently, Russell, in *Human Knowledge: its Scope and Limitations*, has probed at length the possibility of arguing from assumptions about experience, via certain acceptable principles of scientific thought and methodology, to the (probable) existence of an external world with certain features and of other minds. His argument, of course, does not rely on proving the existence of God, and to that extent his attempt to reconstruct knowledge is more sensible than that of Descartes. But on the other hand, Russell (at least in the work under consideration) does not pay much attention to the possibility of a systematically deceptive demon or of systematically deceptive dreams. Russell’s principles all assume that sufficiently orderly experience entitles us to assume the existence of physical entities responsible for that orderly experience. But why not assume that our orderly experience is due to the machinations of some demon? This question Russell does not grapple with. I wish to claim that no attempt to argue for the reasonableness of belief in an external world that ignores Descartes’ demon, i.e. does not attempt to show that there is something definitely *wrong* with the hypothesis of a demon as an explanation of our experiences or to show a *contradiction* or *incoherence* in the notion of a demon deceiver, is a philosophically adequate one.¹ That Descartes saw this to be so constitutes part of his enormous importance as a formulator of scepticism and as an innovator (in

¹ Hence I think that the attempts of philosophers like Chisholm (*Theory of Knowledge*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966, ch. 3), Price (*Perception*, N.Y.: R. M. McBride, 1933, pp. 185–9), and Ayer (*The Problem of Knowledge*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1957, ch. 3, esp. p. 132 f.) to provide principles via which one can show the reasonableness of believing in an external world are philosophically inadequate. These philosophers have urged that if one thinks one sees, or seems to see, an object of a certain sensible kind, it is reasonable (or one has at least some reason) to believe that one is seeing such an object, and thus that there is an external world. Such claims, however true they may be,
modern times) of attempts to overcome scepticism about the external world. Inasmuch as Russell, in *Human Knowledge*, does not cope successfully with the demon, his attempt at reconstructing our knowledge of the external world is philosophically inadequate. And, indeed, perhaps one of the reasons why so many philosophers have considered Moore’s ‘Proof of an External World’ to be so philosophically beside the point is their feeling that Moore’s argument simply shoves the problem of the demon (and of dreaming) aside. Even if one wants to say that Moore’s proof is *some kind* of proof (in the ordinary sense of the word ‘proof’) — and something like this ordinary-language point may have been part of Moore’s reason for presenting his proof the way he did — that proof is at least not *as adequate* a proof of the external world (from a philosophical standpoint) as one that grapples with demon (and dreaming) scepticism and overcomes it. We are looking for such a more adequate proof here.

It is with trepidation that I approach this task; it seems pretty clear that previous attempts to overcome scepticism have been one and all unsuccessful. And my feeling is that there is bound to be much that is wrong with my own arguments against scepticism. On the other hand, I am not aware of anything clearly wrong with my arguments. But, of course, many others have written with the same sense of good faith and adequacy things we would today consider wrong, absurd, even laughable. So I feel dubious about what I say in the present work, even though I know of no particular grievous faults in it. In a way, I think any philosopher approaching a significant philosophical topic on which there has been continual disagreement over the ages should have something of this sense of irony, or tension (call it what you will) about his work on that topic, a sense of rightness and yet of inevitable inadequacy. At best, philosophers seem able only to advance towards the truth, not find it. And perhaps we should limit our aspirations and expectations to just this.

ignore demon (and dreaming) scepticism; it is never shown why the fact that we think we are seeing, or seem to be seeing, an object of some sort gives more support to the claim that we are seeing such an object than to the claim that a demon is making it seem as if we are. They just *assume* the unreasonableness of demon-hypotheses.