***Introduction to Philosophy: Classical and Contemporary Readings* (9th Edition)**

**Part III Summary: Knowledge and Reality**

**Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave”**

Here is a short excerpt from Plato’s *The Republic*—his famous “allegory of the cave.” In it, Plato draws an analogy that is meant to illuminate what it means for a soul to be educated. This has upshots for his discussion about who should lead a city. It is also helpful for understanding Plato’s distinction between the sensible realm and the intelligible realm of forms. Specifically, Plato thinks that philosophers, who have gained knowledge of the good, should lead the city.

**Robert Nozick, “The Experience Machine”**

In this classic excerpt take from his *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, Nozick offers the famous “Experience Machine” thought experiment. Scientists have developed a machine that can simulate any experience you like. Even better, while you’re in the machine, you won’t know that it is a simulation—you’ll think you are living all of your hopes and dreams. Nozick then asks: would you enter the machine? For five minutes? For two years? For the rest of your life? Nozick answers that we would not enter the machine, at least not for an extended period of time, and that this shows we value more than just experiences. We also value those experiences being connected to the world in the right way.

**René Descartes, “Meditations on First Philosophy”**

Descartes’s *Meditations* are essential reading for any student of philosophy. Even though we only include the first three meditations, many important ideas are raised.

Descartes is attempting to build a solid foundation for all knowledge, and to do this, he adopts an interesting methodology. He decides that he will doubt everything that can possibly be doubted so that he can be absolutely sure that no false beliefs creep into his solid foundation. So, he supposes that there is an evil demon deceiving him about everything that he thinks he knows—about the external world, about the existence of his own body, even about the alleged truths of mathematics. If anything is left, that will be his foundation for knowledge.

One thing that is left is the fact that Descartes himself exists. Not even an evil demon could deceive him about his own existence, as to attempt such a deception, Descartes would have to exist to be deceived in the first place! As long as Descartes is thinking, he can be sure that he exists. This is the famous “cogito” argument. It is from this starting point that Descartes goes on to attempt to reconstruct his edifice of knowledge.

Along the way, Descartes presents a couple of influential arguments for the existence of God. In the first, he claims that there are certain ideas that he has that could not have come from anyone except God, and so God must exist. In the second, he presents his own version of the famous ontological argument.

**Keith DeRose and Ted A. Warfield, “Responding to Skepticism”**

DeRose and Warfield start by identifying the structure of skeptical challenges. Where *H* is a suitable skeptical hypothesis and *O* is a proposition one would ordinarily take oneself to know, DeRose and Warfield claim that the structure of skeptical arguments is as follows:

1. I don’t know that not-*H*.

2. If I don’t know that not-*H*, then I don’t know that *O*.

3. Therefore, I don’t know that *O*.

DeRose and Warfield then consider two responses to such arguments. The first, which they dub the “Aw, Come On!” response, is quite common among those first encountering such arguments. The response is to dismiss the argument out of hand, claiming that such skeptical hypotheses are too farfetched or bizarre to take seriously. DeRose and Warfield suggest that, however farfetched or bizarre such hypotheses are, skeptical arguments are nonetheless quite powerful and merit a more in-depth response.

Related to the “Aw, Come On!” response is G.E. Moore’s response, discussed next by DeRose and Warfield. According to this response, we should be far more confident that we know some ordinary proposition—that I have hands, say—than either of the premises. So the challenge from skepticism can be put aside because we know the conclusion to be false. DeRose and Warfield claim that Moore’s response, while perhaps correct, is not very satisfactory. We should prefer to know which premise of the skeptic’s argument is false, and also why the relevant premise strikes us as so plausible. That is, we should prefer a response that can explain the power of the skeptic’s challenge while also pointing out its flaws. Moore’s response does neither.

**Peter J. Graham, “Beginning to Respond to Skepticism”**

In this commissioned piece, Peter Graham explores a more refined way of articulating the challenge of skepticism. Graham puts forth the “best explanation standard” of knowledge which states that evidence for a belief is adequate when, and only when, the proposition that is the content of the belief is a step in the best explanation of the believer’s evidence for that belief. What makes skeptical arguments so challenging, according to Graham, is that they seem to show how the existence of an external world need not be the best explanation for our sensory experiences. The hypothesis that an evil demon is deceiving you at every turn, for example, can explain our sensory experiences just as well as the hypothesis that there is an external world that corresponds to our sensory experiences.

Graham then outlines two different kinds of responses to skeptical arguments in light of the best explanation standard of knowledge. First, there are those responses that attempt to show that, contrary to what the skeptic claims, the external world hypothesis is indeed a better explanation of our sensory experiences than the proposed skeptical hypotheses. Such responses aim to refute the skeptic, in Graham’s terminology. Second, there are those responses that instead try to show that the best explanation standard of knowledge is mistaken, or at least misapplied, by the skeptic. For instance, one might revise that standard as follows: evidence for a belief is adequate when, an only when, the proposition that is the content of the belief is a step in the best *relevant* explanation of the believer’s evidence for that belief. Since skeptical hypotheses hardly seem to be relevant explanations, the skeptic’s challenge can effectively be ignored. Such responses aim to not refute, but instead undermine the skeptic, to again use Graham’s terminology.

**David Hume, “An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding”**

Many important issues are raised in this selection from Hume’s *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. As a short summary cannot possibly cover them all, what follows are some of the highlights.

Hume begins by drawing a number of distinctions that will inform the rest of the selection. In particular, he distinguishes the perceptions of the mind into two classes, or species—impressions and ideas. Impressions are those perceptions that present themselves to the mind with the most vivacity, such as those we receive from our five senses. Ideas, on the other hand, are less lively and are copied from a corresponding impression. Especially important for Hume in this regard is the claim that all ideas are copies of, and correspond to, impressions.

Another distinction Hume makes is among three principles of connection among ideas—resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect. One idea can resemble another, one idea can be contiguous in time and space to another, and one idea can be the effect of another idea, which is the cause.

Finally, Hume makes a division between two different objects of human reason. On the one hand, we reason about relations of ideas, and on the other hand, we reason about matters of fact. With these distinctions out of the way, Hume goes on to discuss the way that we reason about matters of fact. How does it happen?

For Hume, all reasoning concerning matters of fact is founded on the fact that we expect the future to resemble the past. But why do we expect this? Reason alone cannot tell us that the future will resemble the past, because all we have ever observed is what has in fact happened—we’ve never observed what *must* happen. To be sure, it always has turned out that the future has resembled the past, but that is certainly no basis for thinking that it will continue to do so. After all, to argue in that way would be to try to establish that the future will resemble the past by starting with the premise that the future has in fact resembled the past in the past, which is to reason in a circle! Hume concludes that what makes us expect that the future will be like the past is merely custom.

Closely connected to the problem of whether the future will resemble the past is Hume’s discussion of the idea of causation, or of necessary connection. Hume argues that we don’t discover the idea of necessary connection from our senses. After all, we only see that a certain event is always conjoined with another certain event—we never see that they must be so conjoined. Thus, in this case, too, Hume concludes that our idea of cause and effect comes merely from a “customary transition of the imagination from one object to its usual attendant.”

These worries that Hume raises with respect to the idea of necessary connection and whether the future will resemble the past have had an enormous impact on contemporary philosophy.

**W. C. Salmon, “The Problem of Induction”**

In this selection, Salmon lays out the problem of induction as we received it from Hume, surveys several attempts to deal with the problem, and concludes that they all fail. This article helps us see the enormous difficulty and importance of the problem of induction.

The basic question that Hume was trying to answer, according to Salmon, is the following: How do we acquire knowledge of the unobserved? Salmon uses the analogy of an urn filled with black balls. Suppose that all of the black balls we have pulled out so far have tasted like licorice. Are we justified in asserting that the rest of the black balls in the urn will also taste like licorice? Hume’s answer to this question is a simple no. To acquire knowledge of the unobserved, we have to rely on the so-called principle of the uniformity of nature—the idea that the future will resemble the past. But it seems that there can be no rational justification for this principle.

Salmon surveys six different ways of dealing with this problem. The first attempts to give an inductive justification of induction. But, as Hume pointed out, to justify induction inductively is to reason in a circle. The second points out that the sort of induction that actually goes on in science is more complicated than mere induction by enumeration; rather, it involves the hypothetico-deductive method. But Salmon thinks that even this method is just a more complicated form of induction. The third response was given by Karl Popper, who thought that the idea of science was to propose bold conjectures that could be falsified, and that every time a conjecture wasn’t falsified, it was corroborated. Although this seems more promising, the notion of corroboration must be understood inductively, in which case this is just another circular attempt at a justification.

The next attempts do not commit the fallacy of circularity, but Salmon thinks they fail nonetheless. First, one might try to actually establish the principle of the uniformity of nature, as Kant tried to do. But this principle is supposed to be a synthetic a priori truth, and Hume has arguments against the possibility of such truths (and Salmon agrees with Hume here). Moreover, even if we set that objection aside, such a principle wouldn’t help because establishing that the future is similar to the past does not establish that the future is *exactly* like the past. Another approach is to say that all we get from science is probabilities about the future, so there is no need to justify induction. But Salmon points out that even if this is true, probabilities still don’t give us reason to suppose that probable conclusions will be true. To get that, we would need to appeal to induction again. Finally, Salmon considers Reichenbach’s pragmatic justification. In essence, this line of response says that induction is the best method we have, so we are justified in using it on that basis. But Salmon thinks that this pragmatic justification would actually justify more rules of inference than we would want it to.

Having concluded that none of these responses to the problem of induction is satisfactory, Salmon encourages us to work hard on the problem because it shows something problematic about the foundations of all empirical science. We shouldn’t stop *doing* science, of course, but we should certainly be concerned with its foundations.