STATEMENTS ABOUT THE PAST

It is characteristic of philosophers that they exercise their scepticism not so much upon particular statements or beliefs, as upon whole classes of them. They are, indeed, inclined to dispute the particular statements that are made by other philosophers; but apart from these special cases they are interested in particular statements only as examples. The weaknesses which they detect in them are those that they are supposed to share with all the members of the class of which they are taken as typical representatives. And it is this lack of discrimination that gives to philosophic doubt both its frivolity and its strength. A scientist may come to doubt some general hypothesis because the evidence for it does not meet his requirements, but his standards are not so rigorous that no hypothesis can satisfy them. It is left to the philosopher to put in question the validity of any generalization whatsoever, to cast doubt upon a general statement not because of any special weakness of its own but simply because it is a generalization. In their relations with one another men often display a lack of understanding; one does not always know what another person is thinking or feeling. But neither does one always live in an atmosphere of mystery. Not all human beings are equally inscrutable, any more than they are equally perspicacious: a man who can conceal his thoughts or feelings on one occasion may not be able

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to conceal them on another. But the philosophical sceptic ignores these distinctions. He invokes the doubt whether any two people, irrespective of their character or situation, can ever know what is going on in one another's minds. Again, it sometimes happens that people are deceived by their senses; not all perceptions are reliable: some account must be taken of the conditions in which they are made. But the philosopher is interested in the general question whether perception ever gives us 'knowledge of an external world'. His scepticism bears not upon the truth of some perceptual judgements as opposed to others, but upon the truth of any perceptual judgement whatsoever.

It is sometimes claimed by those who wish philosophers to be considered useful that the study of philosophy teaches people to weigh evidence. But the weighing of evidence is governed by accepted standards of proof. What the philosopher is doing, in the examples I have given, is to call in question the standards of proof themselves. And it is in this way also that the existence of the past becomes a philosophical problem. Here again, the philosopher's scepticism is not discriminating. He is not impugning any special set, or type, of historical beliefs. The question that he raises is whether we have sufficient ground for accepting any statement at all about the past, whether we are even justified in our belief that there has been a past. It is not a matter of sifting historical records. What is put in question is our right to regard anything as a record; the suggestion is that there is nothing in the character of what we take as records, whether they have the form of memories or any other, to justify the assumption that they point back to a past.

The first stage in such a sceptical argument, in this