In his paper “Knowledge and Belief”, Norman Malcolm argues that there is a fundamental difference between claims like “The sun is ninety million miles from earth” and “There is a heart in my body” on the one hand, and “Here is an ink bottle”, on the other. Why does Malcolm draw the distinction? Is he right? What implications does his argument have for the Cartesian project?
In his paper “Knowledge and Belief”, Norman Malcolm argues that there is a fundamental difference between claims like “The sun is ninety million miles from earth” and “There is a heart in my body” on the one hand, and “Here is an ink bottle”, on the other. Why does Malcolm draw the distinction? Is he right? What implications does his argument have for the Cartesian project?

In “Knowledge and Belief”, Norman Malcolm outlines three statements about physical objects and draws a distinction between them, arguing that they are known in two different senses of the word. He argues that knowledge of physical objects cannot be doubted, which has implications on the work of other philosophers who argued the opposite, for examples Descartes. We can look at his arguments and consider their persuasiveness.

Malcolm argues that there are two different senses of the word ‘know’ – a strong sense and a weak sense. When using ‘know’ in the weak sense, we are not totally closed to the possibility that something could prove our statement or belief to be wrong. This is what we mean when we say that we ‘know’ a mathematical theorem to be true or that we ‘know’ the answer to a mathematical problem. You could say that you ‘know’ Pythagoras’ theorem to be true. You have read about the theorem in numerous textbooks, leading you to believe that you ‘know’ the formula to be true. However, if a group of renowned mathematicians told you that the theorem was false and demonstrated this to you through a proof, you would be doubtful that you know it and would reconsider if you really know it or not. Another example of this sense of the word ‘know’ could be that you say you ‘know’ the answer to a particular mathematical problem. You could have calculated the answer to the problem numerous times, and you believe that you ‘know’ the answer. However if having the correct answer to the problem was of vital importance, for example while completing your tax returns, then you would be willing to calculate it again to be certain. Here
Malcolm points out that even though you think you ‘know’ the answer to the problem, you are not confident enough that you do not feel that a recalculation is necessary. He says that there is something called ‘making sure’, and because there is something called ‘making sure’, there must also be a thing called ‘finding out that it is false’. Should you find that the answer you get while ‘making sure’ is a different answer to the one you got previously, you will say that you were mistaken while calculating it before, and that you merely thought you knew. In both cases, while saying that you ‘know’, you were not totally closed to the possibility of a refutation proving your knowledge to be false. In the weak sense of ‘know’, you were prepared to let an investigation determine whether something you claim to know is true or false, says Malcolm.

We can contrast the weak sense of ‘know’ with the strong sense. Malcolm says that the strong sense of ‘know’ is where the person claiming to have knowledge would look upon nothing whatsoever as evidence that their proposition is false. Nothing can exist that is incompatible with the proposition being true. In the strong sense of ‘know’, the person does not take into account possible arguments that might arise in the future that could show the proposition to be false. When using the strong sense, unlike the weak sense of ‘know’ you are not prepared to look upon anything as an investigation and do not concede that anything could prove you to be mistaken – your knowledge is not open to question. “No future experience or investigation could prove to me that I am mistaken” is how Malcolm puts it.

Malcolm outlines three statements and then considers how they differ. The first statement is “The sun is 90 million miles away from the earth”; the second is “There is a heart in my body”; and the third is “Here is an ink bottle”. These propositions
differ, and this difference can be seen when imagining that each is false. While I may ‘know’ that the sun is ninety 90 million miles away from earth because I have read this in many physics books and was taught it at GCSE level in school, I have no knowledge of how this came to be common scientific knowledge. I have never performed an experiment to find this out for myself, but I believe that I know this to be true. However, if a group of astronomers, well respected in the field, came to me with new evidence to show that I am wrong in thinking that the sun is 90 million miles from earth, I would be willing to count their re-calculations and expert comments as evidence. I would not tell them that they must be wrong because I know it to be 90 million miles from earth and not the distance that they are now saying it to be. The new evidence would surprise me, but I would accept it and no longer claim knowledge that the sun is 90 million miles away. When initially saying that I knew the distance to be 90 million miles away, I said I knew in the ‘weak sense’. I was prepared to envisage a scenario where I might have to retract my earlier claim to know and acknowledge that I only thought I knew.

While “there is a heart in my body” seems to be one of the most certain statements a person could make, because their blood circulates, and there is a beating in their chest, if they were told by a group of well respected surgeons after a comprehensive search during a chest operation that they have no heart and showed photographic evidence, they would have to reconsider. Malcolm says that in this situation, after being told by the surgeons who were obviously sincere, the person would probably not insist that the surgeons were wrong, but would eventually accept what the surgeons say and would consider to be false what they previously regarded as certain. In this light, to say that you ‘know’ there is a heart in your body is to use ‘know’ in the ‘weak’ sense.
Malcolm argues that the third type of statement is different. He imagines that somebody in another room is looking for an ink-bottle. Then, when he tells the person that there is an inkbottle in the room he is in, the other person asks if he is sure, because they looked in that room before. Malcolm would say that he ‘knows’ there is an inkbottle in the room, in front of him on his desk. He points out that many philosophers have said that it could turn out to be false that there is actually an inkbottle in front of him. As outlined previously, Descartes notably took this stance when doubting knowledge gained from the senses due to his being deceived by them previously. Malcolm takes an entirely different approach. He imagines extraordinary scenarios occurring in the next moment, such as his hand passing through the bottle, the bottle vanishing from sight or that other people would not be able to see the bottle. According to Malcolm, this does not mean that the inkbottle does not exist at present as other philosophers have argued. When his hand appears to pass through the bottle, he could be hallucinating then and not now. If the bottle vanishes, it could cease to exist then, which would not disprove its existence at the current moment. If others are unable to see the bottle, there is the possibility that they are hallucinating and not Malcolm. Another scenario he imagines is that he could in the next moment find himself under a tree in the garden. He argues that this does not mean that was dreaming in the previous moment when he could see the inkbottle, but that it means he could have been transported to the garden. There is nothing that could happen to him in the next moment that he should call “waking up”, and therefore he would accept nothing that could happen to him in the next moment as proof that he is dreaming at present. To Malcolm, there could be no future experience or investigation
that could prove he is mistaken about the existence of the inkbottle, so when he says he ‘knows’ that there is an inkbottle, he uses the strong sense of ‘know’.

He notes that to some this attitude seems unreasonable, but it only seems like it is because they think that “here is an inkbottle” must have the same status as the other two statements, but this is a prejudice. He elaborates on this by using the two processes he mentioned earlier, namely “finding out to be false” and “making sure”. He uses the statement “there is a dollar in the drawer” and says that this statement only turns out to be false when you discover an empty drawer, and it could not be said if it was only probable that it was empty or was still questionable. Also, you could only “make sure” that a drawer was empty sometimes under certain circumstances, as it would not make sense to make sure that a drawer open before your eyes was empty. You already made sure that the drawer was empty when you found the other statement on physical things (there is a dollar in the drawer) to be false. He says that the two concepts cannot exist apart; therefore it is impossible that every statement about physical things could turn out to be false.

We can contrast this view with the view that Descartes took in the Meditations, where he employed ‘Cartesian doubt’. In the Meditations, Descartes tries to establish the limits of knowledge. He says that for our beliefs to be justified, they must be traced back to a statement, belief or proposition that cannot be doubted (tamu.edu). He reasons that his previous beliefs that he had taken to be knowledge had been acquired from his senses and that these had deceived him before. He decides not to trust his senses because it is unwise to trust something that has deceived you before, for
example a friend. He asserts that he may even be mistaken about things that are apparently certain that he observes through his senses, e.g. that he is sitting in front of a fire. He had, in the past, believed that he was doing exactly that when he was in fact sleeping, so he might even be dreaming at that moment. This is the type of statement – that he is sitting in front of a fire – which Malcolm would say he knows in the strong sense of ‘know’. He would not accept anything as proof that he isn’t sitting in front of the fire at present. Descartes also introduces the possibility of an evil demon, which deceives the senses, manipulating everything that he experiences. It is uncertain whether every time he experiences something in the world, the evil demon is not just creating the illusion that it is real. This is a further reason for him not to trust his senses. He discards all his previously accepted beliefs and takes only the claims which are absolutely certain, to be true. If there is any reason why he could doubt its truth, this should be enough for him to reject it. This is because the slightest uncertainty over its truth would make it unsuitable to be used as a firm foundation on which to build up knowledge on sound principles (Warburton 2006). Some beliefs that are immune from doubt would provide a base of indubitable knowledge, giving him his firm foundations that can then be used to give proofs.

Malcolm says that an empirical statement like “here is an inkbottle” has the same logical character as an a priori statement like “5 x 5 = 25” because nothing could make him doubt either and he could not be persuaded that future experience could refute them. “Here is an inkbottle” is not an assertion, as would be natural if he knew or believed that there was not an inkbottle there. He reiterates that the statement is strictly about physical things and not “sensations”, “sense-data” or “appearances”.

Malcolm draws the distinction between the three statements to show the fundamental differences between how the first two statements become known and how the third statement becomes known. The first two statements require an investigation or experiment for proof before they can be known, and are known in the weak sense. The third statement is a statement about a physical object, and Malcolm believes that this type of statement does not need any sort of proof to be known other than the information gained from the senses. He draws the distinction between the two types of statements to show that while the first two require an investigation, and might be proven to be wrong, there is no need to investigate statements like “here is an inkbottle” because nothing could ever prove the nonexistence of physical things like the inkbottle and no future experiment could convince him of their nonexistence.

If it were true that the existence of physical things directly perceived cannot be doubted it would have a large impact on the work of other philosophers who believed that this was in fact the case, such as Descartes. As outlined previously, Descartes took a very different view on physical things, discarding his knowledge of them because he came to know of them through his senses, which had deceived him before. Descartes’ form of systematic doubt would not go very far if physical things cannot in the slightest be doubted. Descartes discarded anything that could be doubted even slightly, but if the existence of physical things cannot be doubted, then he would already have found a statement, belief or proposition that cannot be doubted which is the criteria for our beliefs being justified, giving him no reason to discard his knowledge obtained through his senses.
In conclusion, Malcolm’s argument is a convincing one, as the nonexistence of physical objects such as the inkbottle seems absurd. While I have been deceived by my senses in the past in that I have thought a stranger to be somebody that I know when looking at them from a distance, and I have previously thought that a dream was reality, no future investigation could convince me that I am not currently at my desk and that the glass of water in front of me does not exist. When saying that I know these physical things to exist, I use ‘know’ in the strong sense. I do also agree that while I say that I ‘know’ the boiling point of the chemical element Mercury to be 356.7 degrees Celsius, I have never conducted an experiment into Mercury’s boiling point and would accept a refutation from a scientist, therefore I use ‘know’ in the weak sense in this case. That I have made two statements here, each one using ‘know’ in a different sense of the word, further convinces me of Malcolm’s argument. The deception of my senses in the past does not convince me that all physical objects can be doubted, and therefore I agree with Malcolm and believe that his paper is convincing.
References


<http://philosophy.tamu.edu/~sdaniel/Notes/96class15.html> [Accessed 8 November 2012]
