

**Book Review**

**What Do Philosophers Do?: Skepticism and the Practice of Philosophy**

**By Penelope Maddy.**

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**A Review By  
Theptawee Chokvasin**

*Department of Philosophy and Religion, Faculty of Humanities, Kasetsart University*

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What does philosophy do best? Is it to get around like Socrates who asked the passer-bys questions in dialectic conversation? If it really is, what are we philosophers doing now, or should be doing, in this time of the new millennium? As an answer in response to the question, Penelope Maddy tells us that it is to ask questions which are genuine for philosophers, or to ponder with philosophical questions which are related to other disciplines (*p. 220*).

Throughout the book, there are two main characters playing in the analysis of the practice of philosophy, *Plain Man and Plain Inquirer*. From the philosophical question asking about the true nature of things in the world around us, Plain Man is the guy who believes in common sense of naïve realism which is the thesis that everything around him truly exists as it really is, and Plain Inquirer believes in the ordinary scientific inquiries on the nature of perceptual experience and on the explanation why we believe in the experience. However, it is a task of the Philosopher who has to ask about the strength of justification from experience and common sense by Plain Man and Plain Inquirer, while standing in the very shoes of the two Plains (*pp. 1-6*).

The problem of the external world, especially its topic of skepticism about the external world, is one of the long-lasting problems in philosophy. The general thesis of skepticism is that everything is uncertain and open to doubt. Even the validity of criteria of truth, justification, or certainty, can be dubitable. However, in the present book of Maddy, she does not develop her argument against the thesis of skepticism. What she has done in the book is smarter than that because she uses it as an impulse of

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\* Corresponding Author +66 2579 6525 ext. 109  
E-mail Address: fhumtwc@ku.ac.th

the idea of what philosophers are exactly doing. It is the very idea that, even though skepticism is not fully vaporized from the thoughts of the two Plains, the strength of skeptic thesis itself is not the same with the reason of disbelief, and not strong enough for destroying what philosophy aims to construct.

The skeptic thesis in part I of the book is entitled “*The Dream Argument*” that is for a re-examination of “extraordinary dreaming” starting from the argument design by René Descartes and from debates found in Barry Stroud and J. L. Austin. Descartes is well-known in his elaborated argument showing that we cannot have good criteria of differentiation between those situations in perfectly lucid dreams and in real world (p. 9). Stroud strengthens the argument to show that it seems that skepticism might be the only answer in response to the question because the argument needs some kind of a position of the inquirer with impossible “detached understanding” to distinguish those two situations (pp. 36-37). However, Maddy argues that the style of question from the two Plains is not the same with the style of question asking from skeptic camps. For the Plain Man and Plain Inquirer, the question concerning the knowledge involves just with the evidence and reason of belief in something. But the skeptics ask after conditions of justified knowledge (p. 37). An analysis in the line of ‘ordinary language philosophy’ from Austin tries to extinguish the problems by turning to the ordinary definition of the word ‘know’ that should depend on its context of proper usage in conversation (pp. 44-45). However, Austin’s argument is rejected by Stroud when it comes to the analysis of the word ‘knowledge’ (pp. 66-69).

The skeptic thesis in part II of the book is entitled “*The Argument from Illusion*” which, it is said, developed from three classic British empiricists; John Locke, George Berkeley, and David Hume. It is natural for us to be aware that sometimes we are receiving sensory perception in some form of illusive perceptual experiences, such as seeing a bent stick in water. Therefore, how can we be sure that the very reality of the external world that appears to us is not just an illusion? (pp. 74-78) If those sense-data are the only representations projecting from the reality in its own that is impossible for us to conceive, so, how can we be sure that the reality in itself is the source of, but different from, its representations? Again, from J. L. Austin there is an interpretation of “therapeutic philosophy” which is a method of reading the argument without any judgment of its strength, but reading it without letting our mind remain in its grip (pp. 110-111). We can, therefore, see that to talk about the bent stick in our ordinary language is not involved at all with the thesis that strengthens the argument from illusion (pp. 120-121).

The last question remains, what is the reason to explain why philosophers are so much different in considering the tenet of skepticism? (p. 158) From G. E. Moore's contemplation, it is from philosopher's underestimation of common sense to make a proof of the external world (pp. 158-175). From Wittgenstein's, it is that both of skeptic argument and anti-skeptic argument are just only using language in their own game with their own rule-following (pp. 194-195). However, from the question we can clearly see what philosophers are doing. They are contemplating about what should be counted as the knowledge of the world. Some questions are genuine for them as philosophers, and some philosophical questions are interwoven with complexities shared with other disciplines (pp. 201-220).

From Samuel Loncar's suggestion, disciplinary philosophy may have lost its legitimacy if self-cognition is no more the main topic for philosophizing (Loncar, 2016). From John Shand's argument, philosophy should stay true to itself, not to do philosophy in styles of other disciplines, for making more progress (Shand, 2017). These counter-arguments may be something that Maddy should somewhat have in her mind. She already tells us that contemporary philosophy and science have been interrelated since the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is to ask instead "how these 'good' questions are best addressed, what methods are appropriate and effective" (p. 209).

There are, in my opinion, just only some minor topics missing from her book on skepticism and philosophy. According to the technological advance in virtual reality, we can see more of devices making virtual reality. However, while we are using the devices, we can tell full-blown reality apart from reality illusorily constructed by them. Can this be inferred that some illusions can be half-real and half-imaginary? If it can be, then we need in addition a theory explaining the levels of doubtful experiences.

To tell non-philosophers what philosophers are doing is not an easy task. Nevertheless, Maddy has done it so well in the present book which is not at all difficult to understand even when reading in our leisure time. Moreover, it is appropriate for further investigation in metaphilosophy, especially those topics in philosophical methods.

## References

- Loncar, Samuel. (2016). Why Listen to Philosophers? A Constructive Critique of Disciplinary Philosophy. In *Metaphilosophy* 47(1): 3-25.
- Shand, John. (2017). Philosophy Makes No Progress, So What Is the Point of It? In *Metaphilosophy* 48(3): 284-295.

