



Epistemology and External World Skepticism (continued from page 1)

In case someone is not familiar with the game, simply put it is when one person tries to determine, through 20 yes or no questions, what another person is thinking of, such as an object or a place.

The idea is to shape these yes or no questions to conform with sense experience, such as “is it soft?” or “does it make noise?” Essentially, the person trying to determine the object is going through the process of sense experience to gain knowledge.

How about that twist, right? Well, here it is. In the lesson, we will also introduce Descartes’s “Evil Demon” scenario and include that into the 20 Questions. Moreover, the person who is “knowledgeable” of the subject can choose to either tell the truth or to “deceive” the person seeking that knowledge. It will be very important to outline the ideas of “what knowledge is,” “how we gain knowledge” and also a bit about René Descartes’s “Evil Demon” ideas. All three of these concepts will not be very challenging, so it will entail a smooth lesson and also a very interesting conclusion when the students see how they might not be able to “know” anything if an “Evil Demon” exists.

Lesson Step One

Like I said, it is going to be important to introduce those three basic epistemological concepts so that the rest of the lesson can have a strong impact. I began by asking, “What is Knowledge?” and then had a brief discussion with the students and collected their ideas so that we could come up with our own definition.

After that I lead them into the next important question, “How do we gain knowledge?” At this point we will need to uncover that knowledge can be gained through our external senses or through our internal rationalization. This, I’m sure the students will need a little help with, but it is much better to be asking questions and having them answer them than the other way around. So, I asked, “What do you know and how did you come to know it?” For me, it couldn’t have gone better, someone said, “I know fire is hot, because I’ve burnt my hand before.” I’m sure anyone else who wants to teach a lesson like this will not nearly be so lucky, so I’m sure it would be easy enough to instead ask, “How do we know things such

Call for Submissions

Questions publishes philosophical work by and for young people, including stories, essays, poems, photographs and drawings, etc. In addition, articles related to doing philosophy with young people, reviews of books and materials useful for doing the same, lesson plans (include description or transcripts of student responses), classic thought experiments redefined/modified for modern audience interests and demographics, transcripts of philosophy discussions, photographs of classroom discussions, and more are sought.

Images, whether photographs, drawings, paintings, et al. should be sent as uncompressed TIFF files (with at least 300 dpi resolution.) Written submissions should be sent in Word, WordPerfect, or Rich Text File formats (as .doc, .wpd, or .rtf). Scholarly articles should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style* for textual and citation manners; please use endnotes rather than footnotes.

Be sure to include contact information with your submissions. A copyright release is needed for publication. All submissions should go to QuestionsJournal@gmail.com

Submissions for the next issue should be received by **March 31, 2009**. They will be reviewed first by the editors (Rory Kraft, Jr. and Alison Reiheld), then by the larger editorial board.

Activity: 20 Questions “Evil Demon” Style

Instructions: Pair up with a partner and decide who will perform which role first. Player 1 chooses any object and Player 2 must try to guess the object within 20 True-or-False-type questions. At the end of the game, switch positions and play again.

Twist: Player 1 may secretly choose to be either a Good or Evil Demon. If Player 1 chooses to be a Good Demon then she/he will give TRUTHFUL answers back to player 2 when asked questions. If Player 1 chooses to be an Evil Demon then he/she will LIE and give deceptive answers to Player 2.

Hint: Player 1: if you’re the “Evil Demon” an easy way to continue to lie about your object is to replace all of the answers as if it were some other object.

as fire being hot or ice being cold?”

Once the students have come up with their definition for knowledge and also that they’ve come to determine that knowledge can be, at least, learned through sense experience it is a perfect time to bring in René Descartes’s “Evil Demon” idea.

René Descartes wrote a famous work called *Meditations on First Philosophy*, which posed the same questions which we discuss in the lesson. He was intrigued by the idea of how he was able to know anything. He worked out the many different scenarios, but he eventually came down to the idea of deception. Descartes had the idea that it could be possible for everything he claimed to “know” to be false because an “evil demon” could be tricking him into thinking some things actually weren’t what they seemed. Moreover, that the demon was misleading his perceptions and senses. Imagine how hard it would be to actually “know” anything: it would be impossible and what is worse is that there is no way to ever know if an Evil Demon exists. Descartes was able to get through this theological speed bump with the epiphany of his *Cogito Ergo Sum*, but for the benefit of this lesson that will need to be introduced in the conclusion.

This is the actual outline that I used in the class and it was very easy to understand. I’ve since then changed the lesson a little bit, because typically following a game or two of “20 questions: Evil Demon Style,” I then let them collectively ask me 20 questions as if I were the “Evil Demon.” This will let everyone come together and gain a collective idea of what I want unveil.

Conclusions and Resolutions

The end result should be that the students were unable to gain knowledge if the opposite player was the Evil Demon. To continue, it is still best to be asking questions like, “What happens if our senses are not accurate?” or “What does it mean if we’re all being deceived by an Evil Demon?” At this point in the lesson, everyone should be on board with the idea that if we’re being deceived the acquisition of knowledge through our senses would be impossible. The students for me seemed to be a little bit discouraged because the ideas were not so simple to deny, but it seemed like they wanted to just ignore everything that had been said. Some of the students admitted that everything that they had known might not be true because the “Evil Demon” might exist and they would never know.

Not long after that comment, I took the time to wrap up the lesson and go over Descartes’s *Cogito Ergo Sum*, or as everyone far and wide has come to know it, his *I think Therefore I am*. The students were pleased to know that regardless of any amount of deception from an “Evil Demon” there would still be someone who needs to be deceived. Descartes determined that regardless of whether an “Evil Demon” could succeed in deceiving him, that demon could never convince Descartes that he did not exist; Descartes thinks, therefore Descartes is.