Meditations On Fallibility
By Bill Friedman

Rene Descartes described a duality, a relationship between the physical and the mental. With this duality came a gap and, from this gap, came questions. How could one know truths about the physical if it is not connected to the mental? Descartes answered this by saying that God, who created us and the physical, would not fool the mind by providing false information. God is not a trickster, he is perfect. But, is there a secular answer to the problem of how the mind knows the physical world?

The question, for me, has really been that of fallibility. In this sense, fallibility is the ability to be wrong, to not know truth, to not present truth, or to make mistakes. For something to be fallible, it need only meet one of these four parts. The terms, infallibility, infallible, and other incarnations, simply mean the opposite of fallibility and its own variations.

So now, the question must be rephrased as to make sure no confusion exists. Is there a secular answer to the problem of fallibility? Is the mind so fallible that it cannot know the physical?

Fallibility is a straightforward concept. Mistakes and falsehoods are part of existing, or so I have heard. Many people, religious and otherwise, agree that the mind is fallible. But for argument’s sake, I shall try to play on this concept a little. While there is no reliance on a god in this argument, why not let something else play the part of the infallible?

Let us first suppose that the physical is infallible and the mind is fallible. If the mind is fallible, it is plenty able to make mistakes. A great example is that of misplacing keys. One’s keys have not ceased to be, but one struggles to remember where the keys were placed. Only when one retraces one’s steps does one usually find the misplaced object. Yet, even that is no guaranteed! The mind holds the memories of the movements, so a step could be skipped and the keys remain misplaced. The physical has not tricked the mind here. The keys were set down in a location and that location has not changed. Despite this entire struggle over the keys, the mind knows where the keys are, even if the location is forgotten during the search. The important thing to note is not just that the mind is infallible, but there was no trick pulled by the physical. But there is a problem with the physical being infallible. The physical is not a mental thing. There cannot be an application of a subjective thing, like fallibility, to a non-mental thing. Can the physical present the truth? Yes. But, it can also present falsehoods. Mirages are the prime examples of falsehoods. Can the physical make mistakes? No, that is
subjective. The problem has taken true form now. If the physical is infallible, then there must be a consciousness controlling it, i.e. a god. So, the infallible existence cannot be a part of this argument. But is the mind also to be left in the category of the fallible?

In this instance, let us suppose an infallible mind. In order to answer this, we return again to the example of the mirage. One sees a mirage on a road and knows that it is a falsehood. But, in another scenario, that mirage can do something dangerous. If one is out in a desert for too long, meaning to the point of severe dehydration, and one sees a mirage, one might run to it. Why? The mind knows that the mirage is a falsehood presented by the physical. The reason one runs to a certain illusion is that the mind is fallible. Can the mind be wrong? It is in this example. Can the mind know truth? It can, but not always. Can the mind present truth? No, that is a physical matter. Can the mind make mistakes? It has in this scenario. Furthermore, the infallible mind also implies a god. So, the infallible mind also cannot be a part of this argument. If this is the case, that the mind is fallible and the physical cannot be relied upon, then what answer can be salvaged from this exercise?

If either is claimed as infallible, the secular argument is lost. But, since the mind is notably fallible and the physical cannot be fallible or infallible, the argument remains valid. Does the fallible mind prevent itself from knowing the physical? No. The mind is fallible, but not to the point of complete ignorance of the physical. If one was worked into a corner of pure cynicism to the point of not being able to know any truths about anything physical, then I’m surprised you even picked this paper up. But, that you did pick this up implies some connection between your mind and the physical. The mind is fallible, not to the point of complete alienation from the physical. If the physical were so separate from the mind, then I might as well start writing in a language I make up off the top of my head. It would make just as much sense. But, you are reading this and you have almost finished it, so you have some concept of letters, words, and sentences and their meanings.

I say yes, that there is a secular answer. The answer is that the mind assumes that what it is presented is or is not a truth. What helps determine the truth about things is experience. You have read this paper wondering how it will turn out. Once it finishes you will have experienced it. While the paper itself will not last, the words may warp over time or get smudged, your experience of it does not change. But, you might forget all that was written by the time you put this down. Minds are fallible. But this brings up a better question. Why would the mind, which knows its fallibility, make assumptions about things that have not been experienced?

The answer is almost too ironic. The mind assumes things based on faith. Kierkegaard points out that faith is based on nothing. If no one had faith, then I doubt many things would be done. In fact, I would go so far as to say I do not know whether or not humans would live in a society such as the one we are in now if faith did not get us here.

Then again, I could be wrong. I am fallible.