SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Epistemology is the study of human knowledge—what we can know, how we can know it, and what we cannot know. In this sense, epistemology and metaphysics are complementary disciplines. Epistemology becomes the method of approach to the knowledge of the way the world really is. For some philosophers, for example, Descartes, this approach places its primary trust in reason; accordingly, they are called rationalists. For other philosophers, for example, Locke, the preferred approach is to trust the senses and experience; they are called empiricists. The problem for both the rationalists and the empiricists is to get beyond the mere appearance of things to the reality behind them. The rationalist tries to do this by appealing to intuition and certain principles from which he or she can deduce the way the world really is. The empiricist, on the other hand, appeals to his or her experiences, trying to find evidence for the nature of reality. For both views, however, the danger is that their methods do not always seem to achieve as much as they would like. Rationalists disagree about which principles to start with and which intuitions to trust. Empiricists find that their own method of experience makes it impossible to say anything about what lies beyond experience. Thus Berkeley argues that only our ideas (including God) and the minds that have these ideas exist, and Hume concludes that we can never know anything about reality, but only about our own associations of ideas. Epistemologists are still working on more satisfactory answers to the questions of knowledge, and still trying to defeat or defend once and for all the skeptical conclusions so brilliantly argued by Hume. Finally, we considered a prevalent view of knowledge as justified true belief and used that to reexamine the very idea of analysis in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions.

CHAPTER REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Can you think of any way for Locke to defend his claim that substances exist, but we do not know what they are? How would Locke respond to Berkeley’s conclusion that we can only know ideas?

2. Descartes reestablishes his system of beliefs because of his famous statement “I am a thing that thinks.” Where is the place of the thing that thinks in Locke’s system?

3. Explain the difference between inductive and deductive reasoning and how it applies to the systems of Descartes and Locke.

4. How would you characterize skepticism? In what way have the various thinkers considered in this chapter responded to the skeptics’ challenge? How might the skeptic reply in each case?

5. Explain the difficulties associated with rationalism and empiricism.

KEY TERMS

absolutism
absolutists
analytic (of a sentence or truth)
analytic philosophy
appearance
a priori (knowledge)
association of ideas
causal theory of perception
causation or causality
cause
cogito, ergo sum
conceptual truth
datum
empirical (knowledge)
empiricism
epistemology
explanation
generalization from experience (or induction)
Hume’s fork