

Scepticism and Knowledge

Scepticism as a challenge

There are different kinds of scepticism, some more radical than others. The kind we will primarily be concerned with is of a radical kind, and may be seen as the view that while we may hold any number of beliefs that we consider to be true and justified, in fact we know very little at all about the world around us, if anything.

That said, rather than seeing scepticism as a philosophical position, it is best to think of it as a challenge which confronts epistemologists. A. C. Grayling characterises scepticism as ‘a motivated challenge... to the makers of epistemic claims... The challenge is to defend the grounds offered in support of those claims so that the concerns embodied in the sceptic’s motivation for issuing the challenge will be met... The best sceptic does not himself claim anything; he asks for a defence of our justificatory practices in the light of certain important considerations relating to them. These important considerations concern contingencies affecting our ways of getting, testing, employing and reasoning about our beliefs. The contingencies in question are familiar from the traditional epistemological debate: they relate to the nature of perception, the normal human vulnerability to error, and the existence of states of mind – dreaming, hallucinating, being deluded, and the like – which can be subjectively indistinguishable from states that we normally take to be appropriate for reliably forming and employing the beliefs in question’ (Grayling, 2009, pp.171 and 173).

Doubt and scepticism

Scepticism begins with sensible doubts. A stick apparently bent when immersed in water makes us doubt whether what we think we see is really there. So do mirages, and so do the light of distance stars, now extinct. There again, the vividness of dreams makes us wonder whether some of our vivid thoughts are themselves dreams.

The sceptic's next move is to generalise these doubts. Maybe all perception is illusory, and maybe all experience is a dream.

Parallel doubts can be raised about identity, memory, and about reality in general.

Doubting the senses

Descartes' Dreaming Argument:

1. If I am now dreaming, then my experiences and beliefs might be false.
2. I cannot be certain that I am not dreaming.
3. Therefore, my experiences and beliefs might be false.

Descartes Evil Demon Argument:

1. If there is a malicious demon, then all my experiences and beliefs are false.
2. I cannot be certain that there is no malicious demon.
3. Therefore, my experience and beliefs might be false.

Descartes was not the first (nor the last) to doubt the evidence provided by sensory experience. In *Theaetetus*, Plato presents the view of Protagoras: '[T]hings are to you such as they appear to you, and to me as they appear to me.... [T]he wind is cold to him who is cold, and not to him who is not' (151d-152c). In the light of such disagreements, can we trust the evidence provided by our senses?

Relatedly, we will discuss how the **reliabilist** might respond to the sceptic, and will consider the challenge that remains despite the reliabilist's reasonable response.

Appearance and reality

The sceptic, then, questions whether appearances are a good guide to how things are in reality. Certainly, it appears that there's a table in front of me, but how do I know that appearances are a reliable guide to how things really are? How do I know that I am not a brain in a vat being fed experiences through electrical stimulation to the brain? How do I know that what I take to be the real world is not just an elaborate computer-generated illusion? In asking such questions, the sceptic challenges our most basic beliefs and assumptions about the world.

However...

The sceptic saws off the branch she is sitting on. Illusions would be not illusions if there were nothing to contrast them with. Nor would dreams be dreams. (The suggestion that all experience is a dream would only serve to undermine the concept of a dream.)

In the same vein, Gilbert Ryle argued that we must have some knowledge of truth to make sense of being incorrect or mistaken. Without real coins, coins could not be counterfeit. Counterfeit coins would make no sense to us if there were no real coins (see Ryle, 1964, pp.94-96).

So radical scepticism (at least often) proves to be self-undermining.

Descartes' concern that he might be the victim of an evil, deceiving demon, and that all his apparent knowledge might be groundless, may

be a case in point. Deception is only possible where there is the possibility of non-deception.

Infallibilism and scepticism

Given that we are subject to error in forming our beliefs, must we be absolutely certain that a belief is true before we can call it knowledge? We might think that infallibilism – the view that a belief can only qualify as knowledge if it is impossible for us to be mistaken about it – can be used to satisfy some of the sceptic's doubts. However, this view actually tends to lead to scepticism. Indeed, Peter Unger argues that there is hardly anything of which we are certain, and this leads him to make the sceptical claim that there is hardly anything which we can be said to know (Unger, 1971).

Note the word 'hardly' here; perhaps there are some things of which we can be certain and thus some things we can know. Perhaps, for e.g., I can know that there's a cat before me. However, a radical sceptic might respond as follows: but can I know that I know that there is a cat before me? In order to know this, I would have to know that my senses were not deceiving me, but there is no way of establishing this, for even if my senses were deceptive and I were a brain in a vat being fed illusionary experiences through electrical stimulation to the brain, I would still trust my senses because I would be deceived into thinking that they were reliable (Law, 2007, p.55).

But even if we cannot always be sure or certain that we know what we think we know, or that we know that we know, the possibility that all apparent knowledge is illusion (a problem put forward by radical sceptics) is itself perhaps an illusory problem.

References

- Gilbert Ryle, *Dilemmas: The Tarner Lectures, 1953*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), ch.7, 'Perception'.
- A.C. Grayling, 'Scepticism and Justification', in *Scepticism and the Possibility of Knowledge* (New York: Continuum, 2009).
- The public-domain translation of Plato's *Theaetetus*, translated by Benjamin Jowett, accessed at: <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/theatu.html>, on 17/06/13.
- Stephen Law, *Philosophy* (London: Dorling Kindersely Ltd., 2007).
- Peter Unger, 'In Defense of Skepticism', *The Philosophical Review*, Vol.80, No.2, 1971, pp.198-219.

Reading for students

Essential reading

- Duncan Pritchard, *What is This Thing Called Knowledge?* (London and NY: Routledge, 2006), ch.12.
- Gilbert Ryle, *Dilemmas: The Tarner Lectures, 1953*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), ch.7, 'Perception'.

Recommended reading

- John Hospers, *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis* [1956], fourth edn. (London: Routledge, 1997), Ch.3, Sec.1, on dreams, deceptions, doubts, and illusions.
- J. L. Evans, *Knowledge and Infallibility* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1978), ch.3, 'Knowledge and Infallibility'.

Further reading

- C. J. Hookway, entry on 'Scepticism', in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, edited by Ted Honderich (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- Peter Unger, 'In Defense of Skepticism', *The Philosophical Review*, Vol.80, No.2, 1971, pp.198-219. (Accessible via Jstor.)
- James Cargile, 'In Reply to 'A Defense of Skepticism'', in *Philosophical Review*, Vol.81, 1972, pp.229-36, reprinted in *Essays in Knowledge and Justification*, eds. George Pappas and Marshall Swain (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), pp.337-45.
- Jonathan Dancy, *Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), ch.1, 'Scepticism'.