

An Introduction to Epistemology

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BROADVIEW GUIDES to PHILOSOPHY

There is, however, a somewhat weaker interpretation of “adequate reason.” Our ordinary, uncritical practice is to accept UP as legitimate unless we have some reason to believe it to be false. Common sense seems to accept UP for specified ranges of cases unless there is reason to think that UP is false in these sorts of case. But Hume seems to be claiming that such inferences are rational only if we have some positive reason for believing UP to be true. Now, we would have a response to Hume if we had some reason for preferring the commonsense account of this inference to Hume’s. As yet, however, we do not have such an explanation or reason.

Regardless of how this issue turns out, an implication of Hume’s arguments needs to be emphasized. These are not merely academic speculations of someone with too much time on his hands. Hume’s arguments call into question our conception of human beings as essentially rational beings. Although we do not always live up to our essence, although we do not always believe or act rationally, our conception of ourselves is that *we are at the very least capable of rationality*. Indeed, we think that we have some beliefs that are rational and that can, by means of rational methods, extend the class of such beliefs. To think, as Hume suggests we must, that ultimately we are moved by little more than a kind of *animal faith* is to invite a wholesale revision of what it is to be a human being.

SKEPTICISM AND THE DEFENSE OF OUR COGNITIVE PRACTICES

Must we accept the skeptic’s account of our cognitive situation? Is there some way in which we can at least defuse, if not outright refute, the skeptical challenges thus far encountered? It is important to note here just how difficult the situation is for someone who wants to respond to the skeptic. One way of construing the skeptic’s demand is this. Take our normal cognitive methods, our normal means of acquiring beliefs, our customary cognitive “toolbox,” and set those aside. The skeptic then challenges us to provide a justification of those methods. That is, the skeptic demands that we show our methods to be up to the task without using the methods in question. The Cartesian skeptic will not permit us to use perceptual beliefs to justify the adequacy of perception. Nor will Hume permit us to use induction to justify induction. The defender of common practice consequently faces a difficult task.

Is Skepticism Inevitable?

Before beginning our analysis of responses to skepticism, it is worth noting that the skeptical conclusion can seem inevitable. An assumption of our normal view is that the world, comprising a myriad of objects and their properties, is largely independent of our beliefs about that world. My belief that there is a green cup on the table does not make it true that there

is a green cup. Our normal view is that our beliefs do not determine the facts. **Realism** is the view that the world is indeed mind-independent. In this sense, our commonsense view is realist.

The mind-independence of the world thus sets our cognitive task and our cognitive challenge. Our task is to acquire beliefs that accurately reflect that independent world and to avoid beliefs that do not. Our challenge is to find ways or methods that yield accurate beliefs, or *true* beliefs. However, because the world is independent of our beliefs, it seems possible that any method we employ might always fall short. The skeptic claims that we cannot rule out the possibility that the failure of our beliefs to reflect the facts is systematic. According to the skeptic, there is no reason to tip the scale toward trusting our beliefs as opposed to doubting our beliefs. Realism thus seems to go hand in hand with the possibility of skepticism.

~~Some have thought that the only way to avoid skepticism is by giving up realism, the belief in a mind-independent world. In this view, the key to knowledge and justification is to adopt idealism, the view that the world or the facts about that world are in some sense dependent on our beliefs.¹¹ Continuing to hold a realist view while meeting the skeptical challenge is a more difficult task, but it is the approach adopted by most epistemologists. It is the realist approach that we adopt in what follows.~~

Two Types of Defense

~~One type of refutation strategy is the attempt to show that the skeptic's position is in some way internally inconsistent. Typically, this strategy requires showing that if the skeptic accepts certain propositions, then the skeptic cannot consistently deny that we have knowledge or justified beliefs. This type of argument suggests that if one holds that we have beliefs or thoughts of a certain kind, then one is also committed to holding that we have justified beliefs or knowledge. For example, it is argued that if we mean anything by the concept "see," then we must accept that vision normally gives us true beliefs.¹² Another well-known example is the claim that if we accept that we have beliefs, which the skeptic presumably must concede, then we must also accept that most of our beliefs are true.¹³ These types of arguments are sometimes called *transcendental arguments*. Such arguments attempt to show that a necessary condition of our thinking is that we do indeed have knowledge or justified belief. In the next~~

11 Hilary Putnam has advocated such a view. He referred to his view as an "internal realism." See, for example, Putnam 1981 and Putnam 1983b. Although his more recent views are somewhat different, Richard Rorty has also argued against the realist view of the world; see Rorty 1982, pp. 3–18.

12 Barry Stroud discusses this sort of argument in Stroud 1969, pp. 54–69.

13 Donald Davidson presents this view in Davidson 1986a, pp. 307–319.

~~section, we consider a particular instance of this type of argument by P.F. Strawson.~~

The second type of strategy attempts to rebut rather than refute the skeptic. In order to formulate the challenge, the skeptic had to commit, if only tacitly, to certain assumptions. We are thus at least free to ask whether there is any compelling reason to accept the skeptic's assumptions. That is, although we may not be able to show that the skeptical position is mistaken, we may nonetheless be able to show that the skeptic is not entitled to some of the claims necessary for formulating the array of skeptical arguments. The distinction between these two approaches is characterized as that between (a) refuting the skeptical position, showing that it is plainly wrong, and (b) merely rebutting the skeptic, showing that the skeptic's arguments are not compelling.

Proponents of this second strategy argue that the skeptic is committed to certain controversial claims or assumptions. Presumably, the skeptic cannot show that these claims or assumptions are compelling; the skeptic cannot provide sufficient reason for accepting these claims or assumptions. For example, the Cartesian skeptic holds that we have knowledge only if we are certain that our beliefs are infallible. As we will see in the next section, one might reasonably wonder whether knowledge requires certainty or infallibility.

This is by no means a complete survey of the variety of responses to skepticism. But this rough twofold classification is perhaps sufficient to frame the responses we consider in the next section.

RESPONDING TO THE SKEPTIC

Is Certainty Necessary for Knowledge?

The Cartesian skeptic, as we noted, holds that knowledge requires infallibility. Of course, as we also noted, skepticism is not wedded to infallibility. Neither the alternative-scenario skeptical challenge nor Hume's worry about induction appeals to the notion of infallibility.

It is perhaps worth briefly noting Descartes' own response to the demon argument. In Meditation II, Descartes argued that he knew at least one thing for certain: that if an evil demon deceived him, he (Descartes) must exist. This is the famous *cogito argument*, commonly rendered as "I think, therefore, I am." At this stage, Descartes had an infallible belief. He knew that global skepticism was wrong, even though he could be sure of little else at this point.

Still, we might wonder whether knowledge requires the impossibility of mistake. We are often willing to claim, for example, that Sara knows that there is a blue ball on the floor even though it is logically possible that Sara is mistaken. It will not do, however, simply to assert against the skeptic

that our ordinary practice does not require the impossibility of mistake. The issue between the skeptic and the defender of our more common practice is an evaluative issue: *Should* we count the impossibility of mistake as a condition of knowledge? The question for us then is whether we are obligated to accept the standard the skeptic has identified. If we cannot find a way to reject the skeptic's standard, then our claims to knowledge or rationality will indeed seem to be mere pretensions. Our many putative claims to knowledge seem rarely to satisfy such lofty standards. We need a way for choosing between the two standards.

First, we might consider why the skeptic insists on such a lofty, stringent standard. That is, we might consider what general epistemic goal is served by the skeptic's choice of standards that is not served by our more ordinary, common one. Examine, for a moment, the requirement of certainty as a condition of knowledge. The explicit goal here apparently is the avoidance of counting something as knowledge that is in fact not knowledge at all, but rather a false belief. The skeptic thus seems to think that running the risk of mistake is detrimental to our cognitive welfare or irrational. Descartes appears to have precisely this sort of worry; he seems to think that the merely probable threatens our ability to attain knowledge. Still, we might wonder whether, in general, our weaker standard is really so detrimental.

The skeptic insists on a rather cautious epistemic policy.¹⁴ An assumption that may underlie the skeptic's preference is that we will be epistemically confounded by our mistakes. Only by adopting the stringent skeptical standard will we be able to tell the difference between genuine items of knowledge and mere pretenders. Perhaps the skeptic thinks that differential epistemic assessment of our beliefs is possible only if we adopt the infallibility standard. Surely, however, we will want to know why we should accept this controversial claim. The history of our cognitive endeavors *seems* to show that we have been progressively more able to discriminate epistemically praiseworthy beliefs from those less so. We have often rooted out the mere pretenders from the genuine item. And we have been able to do this despite the fact that we have not counted the impossibility of mistake as a requirement of knowledge. Of course, this approach has sometimes required that we change our methods for making the requisite differential assessment, but this, too, we have often been able to do. Our reliance on a weaker standard still enables us to distinguish between beliefs that are mere guesses, those that are justified, and those that are instances of knowledge. What more could we want from an epistemic standard? Thus, if the skeptic is moved to adopt certainty as a condition of knowledge because of the worry that we will be unable to assess differentially the

14 This type of response is along the line of argument suggested by Hookway 1990. Hookway suggests that skepticism might in part be motivated by the thought that only by adhering to a rather cautious epistemic policy will we be able to regulate our inquiries.

epistemic status of our beliefs, we do not yet have a compelling motivation for adopting such a standard.

The infallibility skeptic may, of course, worry that this line of response takes for granted precisely what is at issue. Our aim, however, is to show that the skeptic has not presented us with good reason to prefer the infallibility standard. The skeptic may claim that we *ought* to accept infallibility as our standard, but we may expect some reason for this “ought.” We might expect, for example, that our cognitive endeavors are in some sort of disarray. But this is not *evidently* the case, as the previous paragraph illustrates.

Perhaps, however, the skeptic thinks that the requirement of infallibility is indicated by what we might take as a paradigm of knowledge.¹⁵ Knowledge of our own mental states, of what we think, is a clear example of a kind of infallible belief.

The skeptic might then argue along the following line: Suppose we take knowledge of our own mental states as the model of what it is to have knowledge. Because knowledge of our own mental states is always certain, then any knowledge must similarly be infallible. You might know that you *think* that there is a white cup in front of you. But, the skeptic urges, we should apply the exact same criteria to your alleged knowledge that there is in fact a white cup.

Descartes and the Probable

Richard H. Popkin describes a meeting in approximately 1628 at which Descartes attempted to show that if we accept the merely probable as our standard of truth, we risk accepting the false. Descartes took examples of accepted truths and, using probability as a standard, showed that these truths were false. He then took examples of falsehoods and, again using probability as the guide, constructed arguments to show that these falsehoods were indeed plausible. The audience found this shocking, and Descartes is reported to have explained to them his infallible means for attaining truth. (See “For Further Study.”)

We might note two arguments against this attempt to motivate the skeptic’s preferred standard for knowledge. First, it might be argued that the skeptic has assumed precisely what is at issue. But more importantly, even given that we have infallible access to the contents of our own mind, it does not follow that infallibility is a necessary condition of knowledge. The defender of our commonsense view might concede that infallibility is *enough* to give us knowledge. Still, the commonsense advocate might argue

15 A more sophisticated version of this argument is found in Meyers 1988, pp. 156–160.

that the skeptic has mistaken the fact that infallibility is *enough* for knowledge with the claim that infallibility is *required* for knowledge. Second, it might be argued that we are no more infallible with respect to knowledge of our own mental states than we are with respect to simple perceptual beliefs under optimal conditions. We will pursue this issue in greater detail in Chapter Four. Here, it will be sufficient to note that the skeptic owes us an argument that introspection yields infallibility. That is, the skeptic cannot use introspection as a motivation for holding that knowledge requires infallibility unless the skeptic gives us some reason for thinking that we do know infallibly the contents of our own mind.

We should be careful not to lose sight of our aim here. We are looking for some reason to think that knowledge requires infallibility, as the skeptic claims. Because the skeptic claims that our commonsense view is too lax, we are looking for some reason to prefer the skeptic's view to our commonsense view. The requirement of infallibility is a substantial claim about the nature of knowledge. But we are not obligated to accept this requirement unless we can find some reason for thinking that the skeptic's view is preferable. Thus far, we have been unable to do so.

Show and Tell: Ruling Out That One Is Dreaming

~~Infallibility is not, however, a necessary feature of the skeptical challenge. The skeptic claims that if we know, we must be able to rule out alternative scenarios, such as that we might be dreaming. There must be some indication that enables us to tell that we are not dreaming. When pressed by the skeptic, we must be able to show that we are not dreaming by exhibiting or presenting the indications that enable us to tell we are not dreaming. The skeptic thus claims that we must be able to show that we can rule out competing scenarios, scenarios in which we would have the very sane, yet false, belief. What is meant by "show" in this sort of case? It seems to mean that a person could provide or articulate reasons that explain why the competing scenario cannot be correct or is less preferable than our normal view.~~

~~It is important to recognize that the skeptic is making two different claims. It is certainly correct that if I know a certain proposition, P, then P is true. Thus, if I know that I am sitting at home in front of the computer, then that proposition, that I am sitting at home in front of a computer, is true. Moreover, it is plausible that I have some reasons for thinking that I am home. It is, however, not as clear how the skeptic moves from these unobjectionable claims to the more stringent claim that I need adequate reasons for ruling out a proposition incompatible with my knowledge. More generally, we might wonder why the skeptic thinks that our reasons must be adequate to rule out every alternative scenario.~~

~~Consider first an ordinary case. Suppose you believe that you are having a test on a particular day, the syllabus says a test is scheduled, and the~~