

Question 1: On the *significance* of philosophical scepticism, in its several senses.

Meaning (OED 1a)

Scepticism is the view that we cannot have knowledge about anything whatsoever, or, within a restricted range, that we cannot have knowledge about a specific subject-matter. The general form of scepticism with which I am concerned is scepticism about the external world (SEW) – that is, the view that we cannot know anything about the world around us. [Within this essay I assume the Justified True Belief Analysis of Knowledge: Some person (*S*) knows that some proposition (*p*) is true if and only if

P is true

S believes *p*

S is fully justified in believing *p*.]

The quality of expressing or implying something (OED 1b)

SEW hinges on the claim that we are not in a position to rule out the possibility that the world is entirely different from what we would normally believe on the basis of our sensory evidence – thus entailing that our sensory evidence is radically misleading. What if the world of material objects does not exist and I am being deceived into thinking it does by an evil demon – a demon that causes me to have just the sensory experiences I am actually having? Or, in the modern version of this sceptical alternative introduced by René Descartes, what if a scientist is stimulating my brain in vitro so that I have all the sensory experiences I would have if I had a body and interacted, in the normal way, with the world of material objects? This alternative is incompatible with what I claim to know about the external world, because, according to it, that world does not exist. What's more, given that this alternative entails that it appears to me that the world exists, it is compatible with my evidence. It thus seems that I have no basis for ruling out this alternative, since, if it were actual, my experience would not change in any way. The sceptic next claims that if I cannot rule out the possibility that I am being systematically deceived, then I cannot have knowledge of what really exists. And because this argument is supposed to generalize, the same line of reasoning can be brought to bear against any belief about the external world. The sceptic's conclusion, therefore, is that no one knows anything about the external world.

The quality of being worthy of attention (OED 2)

SEW is of philosophical interest because arguments such as that outlined above appear to very strong – thus presenting us with the problem of how to respond to them. One way would be to accept their sceptical conclusions, but most philosophers are unwilling to do so. There have been any number of attempts by non-sceptics to refute, or in some way neutralize or deflate, the force of these arguments. SEW, however, is not easily dispatched...

As with most forms of scepticism, SEW exploits sceptical alternatives. Sceptical alternatives provide a beginning for powerful sceptical arguments, via the entailment principle. In effect, this principle says that I can know proposition p only if my evidence (e) precludes the possibility of error. More precisely:

S knows p on the basis of e only if e entails p

A sceptical alternative is a proposition incompatible with p but compatible with e :

Proposition h is an alternative to p just in case h is incompatible with p – that is, they cannot both be true. Then h is a sceptical alternative to p provided h is an alternative to p compatible with e

It follows from the mere existence of sceptical alternatives that I do not know those propositions I ordinarily claim to know.

Although this principle is compelling, many philosophers have rejected it. According to the position known as fallibilism, this sort of certainty is not a requirement of knowledge; I can have knowledge even if my claim to it is fallible (as in, to some degree uncertain).

The fallibilist approach has its merits but is unsatisfying as a response to SEW. What the sceptic contends is that the existence of alternatives consistent with my evidence undermines my claims to know. Fallibilists reply that such alternatives do not undermine my knowledge claims – but this is the very point at issue. By using the word “knowledge” in a different way to the sceptic, fallibilists do not prove what the sceptic says cannot be proved – namely, that I can have certain knowledge.

Nevertheless, in defence of their assertion, fallibilists can appeal to our strong intuition that, in many cases, we do know things – despite the existence of sceptical

alternatives. It is not clear that the sceptic can undermine these intuitions except by drawing on the entailment principle – which itself is undermined by those intuitions. In other words, both sides beg the question here.

The sceptic can however exploit the fallibilist position that permits the existence of alternatives to known propositions. A new sceptical argument begins with the plausible claim that, whatever else I may say about the importance of sceptical alternatives, I cannot claim, plausibly, to know that I am not a brain being stimulated in vitro. None of my evidence counts against this hypothesis since, if it were true, I would have just that evidence. The sceptic then appeals to a principle saying that the set of known (by *S*) propositions is closed under known (by *S*) entailment:

If *S* knows *p*, and *S* knows that *p* entails not-*h*, then *S* knows not-*h*.

It follows (from this forceful principle and the claim that I fail to know sceptical alternatives are false) that I fail to know the propositions I ordinarily claim to know – since I know those propositions entail the falsity of sceptical alternatives. This argument at no point presupposes the entailment principle, and so presents even more problems for fallibilism.

Importance (OED 2)

Fallibilism is only one way in which people have responded to scepticism. There have been many more responses and will be many yet. Indeed, much of epistemology has arisen either in defence of or opposition to various forms of scepticism. In this sense, scepticism's value accrues from its role as a foil, contrastively illuminating what is required for knowledge. As John Greco argues, sceptical arguments are useful and important because they motivate progress in philosophy – by highlighting mistaken assumptions about knowledge and evidence, and showing us that those assumptions have unacceptable consequences (2-3).

Bibliography

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