

METAPHYSICS AND EPISTEMOLOGY

Scepticism

1. We should distinguish the concept of knowledge from the concept of belief, even from the concept of justified belief. (A justified belief is the opposite of an arbitrary, unsupported one.)

Knowledge presupposes truth. To be precise, when someone knows that *p*, then it is true that *p*. Moreover, when someone knows that *p*, then they believe that *p*. But, of course, someone may believe that *p* without its being true that *p*.

Justified belief does not presuppose truth. Someone may be justified in believing that *p* while it is not true that *p*. Let's imagine a scientist who studies some phenomenon systematically and finds out that a certain theory explains her observations more simply than any other view; so she accepts the theory, but it is later proved to be wrong. The scientist had beliefs that were justified but not true. Consequently, someone may be justified in believing that *p*, but not know that *p*.

2. In philosophy, scepticism is characterized by doubt about various claims and usually concerns beliefs that are basic ingredients of either common sense or scientific method. Contemporary philosophical scepticism, now, as opposed mainly to its ancient counterpart, is not an approach that is adopted by some real philosophers; it is an approach that is often led to extreme conclusions and that is discussed by real philosophers who try to refute it. It is considered to be a central topic in epistemology. For epistemology tries to judge our general methods for forming beliefs, and scepticism questions those methods. We will focus on contemporary philosophical scepticism.

This scepticism has several forms. It is sometimes presented as an attitude and not as a bundle of theses. The problem here is that an attitude of doubt about everything is not particularly interesting philosophically, since anyone who adopts that attitude cannot be dissuaded through philosophical means; he will find whatever he is told doubtful. Scepticism is more interesting when it is accompanied with arguments; but in that case, it will consist in some theses, the conclusions of its arguments. The most typical sceptical thesis is that there is no knowledge; we know nothing.

Now, when scepticism has the form of a bundle of theses, we can further distinguish between different kinds of it. One distinction is that between local and global scepticism. The local version concerns one sector of our beliefs; e.g. it may concern the future, religion or other people's inner world. A sceptic may assert that we never have any knowledge about the future, or that we cannot know whether there is a God and what are the features of God, or that we do not know what other people are thinking or feeling. By contrast, global scepticism is not confined to one sector.

A second distinction is that between scepticism about knowledge and scepticism about justified belief. The former says that we know nothing (either entirely nothing or nothing in some sector). The latter says that we have no justified belief (either entirely none or none in some sector). It is sometimes thought that we can accept that there is no knowledge, use the concept of justified belief instead of the concept of knowledge, and so continue our investigations without caring about scepticism any more. But the problem is that scepticism, too, can take a form that will concern justified belief instead of knowledge.

A third distinction is that between genuine and methodological scepticism. We have the genuine kind when a philosopher (real or imaginary) endorses the sceptical arguments she develops. We have the methodological kind when a philosopher develops sceptical arguments without endorsing them, and does so because she is trying to find any beliefs on which those arguments cannot cast doubt. Descartes's scepticism was methodological. (The main belief about which none of the sceptical arguments he examined or invented could engender doubts was his belief that he was thinking, the famous *cogito*.)

3. Here are some sceptical arguments (when presenting them, I speak as if I accepted them):

(a) The scenario of brains in a vat. This scenario is due to H. Putnam. You think you have normal human bodies. Yet could it be that you are nothing but brains hanging in a big vat? Could it be that some scientists cause your experiences in an artificial manner in the context of some experiment? Whether you are brains in a vat and subject to such scientific control or whether your sensory representations are produced in the normal way, your experiences are exactly the same. So, since you can only judge by your experiences, you do not know which of the two cases obtains. Thus you do not know that you are not brains in a vat.

Since you do not know that, you also do not know various other things you think you know, e.g. that you are sitting at a desk, that you are wearing clothes, that you have arms, etc. For we can invoke the following principle:

(1) $[K_a p \wedge K_a(p \rightarrow q)] \rightarrow K_a q$.

In words: if a knows that p, and a also knows that if p then q, then a knows that q. (1) is the principle that knowledge is *closed under known implication*. The principle appears to be obvious: if you are aware that something is the case, and you are also aware that this implies another proposition, you cannot but be aware that this other proposition is the case too. Thus if you know that you are sitting at a desk, and you also know that if you are sitting at a desk, you are not brains in a vat, then you know that you are not brains in a vat. But surely you know that if you are sitting at a desk, you are not brains in a vat. (It is obvious that a bare brain cannot be sitting.) Hence, if you know that you are sitting at a desk, then you know that you are not brains in a vat. But, as we saw in the preceding paragraph, you do not know that you are not brains in a vat. Therefore, you do not know that you are sitting at a desk. Generally, you do not know anything such that you are aware that if it is the case, then you are not brains in a vat.

(b) The argument of hallucinations and illusions. At least sometimes, we have hallucinations (or illusions). When this happens, we often do not realize it and think that our experiences reflect reality. Hence even now, although you regard the things you see and hear as real, it may be that you are hallucinating. But since this eventuality is open, you do not know that you are not hallucinating.

Also, since you may be hallucinating, you may e.g. not be in the university (as you think). Hence you do not know that you are in the university.

(c) The argument of dreaming. When we dream, we often do not realize it and think that what we see in the dream happens in reality. Consequently, even now, while you think that you are not sleeping and not dreaming, it may be that you are dreaming. Hence you do not know that you are not dreaming.

Since, now, you do not know that, by (1) you do not know anything such that you are aware

that if it is the case, then you are not dreaming. E.g. you do not know that you are in the university and you are attending a lecture.

(d) The argument of previous errors. Let's say that you form a belief. For example, you add some numbers and so form the view that the sum is 5629. In the past, you certainly made some mistakes in forming beliefs of the same kind as your present belief, e.g. in forming beliefs based on arithmetical calculations. When you made such a mistake, you didn't realize you made one. There is no substantial difference between how things seemed to you then and how they seem to you now. But you made a mistake then. Hence, as far as you can judge, you may be making a mistake now too. Consequently, you do not know that you aren't making a mistake; e.g. you do not know that the sum is actually 5629.

(e) How Hume argued that we have no empirical knowledge about parts of reality that we have not observed:

In order for our beliefs that are based on our experiences and concern parts of reality we have not observed to constitute knowledge, we must have reasons showing that our experiences are a reliable guide to those parts of reality. But in order to have reasons showing something along those lines, we must have reasons showing that the parts of reality we did not observe are similar to those we observed (from which our experiences are derived). It is not possible to have such reasons, though. For the view that the parts of reality we did not observe are similar to those we observed is not a necessary truth, of which we could become aware by reflection. And if we try to support that view by means of our experiences, we shall presuppose it (because our experiences concern only things we observed, whereas the view concerns the other things too) and so our thought will be circular.

(f) Agrippa's trilemma: No belief is justified. For if we take any belief b , an alleged justification of b will consist in a series of beliefs b_1, b_2, b_3, \dots where b_1 is b , b_2 is supposed to justify b_1 , b_3 is supposed to justify b_2 , and so forth. There are three possibilities for such a series. (i) The series goes on *ad infinitum* without any belief occurring twice. In this case, neither b nor any other belief in the series is justified. In order to justify a belief, we must somehow support it. Here the whole series remains unsupported. (ii) The series stops at some belief, e.g. b_8 . Then b_8 stays unjustified and so cannot justify those preceding it in the series. (iii) The series forms a circle somewhere; e.g. b_8 is identical with b_2 . In this case, b_2 stays unjustified (whence the same is true of b). For a circular syllogism cannot support its conclusion. To sum up, whichever of cases (i)–(iii) may obtain, the alleged justification is no real justification.

4. What is the scope of those arguments?

Only (d) and (f) appear to lead to global scepticism; (a)–(c) show at best that our various empirical beliefs about our environment do not constitute knowledge. But they do not seem to show anything about our logical and mathematical beliefs. Hume's argument also concerns a specific category of views: our views about the things we haven't observed. Argument (d) seems to support a global scepticism because, whatever belief we may take, it will come under a kind of beliefs in which we have made some mistakes.

As I formulated them here, arguments (a)–(e) involve the concept of knowledge and not the concept of justified belief. Yet in all of them we can substitute the latter notion for the former without any perceptible change in the degree to which the arguments are convincing. It should be noted that if we make such a substitution, principle (1) will be

replaced by the corresponding principle about justified belief:

(1') $[JBap \wedge JBa(p \rightarrow q)] \rightarrow JBaq.$

'JBap' means 'a is justified in believing that p'.

Argument (f) concerns justified beliefs directly. But every sceptical argument against the existence of such beliefs is also an indirect argument against the existence of knowledge. For if no belief is justified, no belief amounts to knowledge.

5. Some arguments against scepticism (we will see more in the coming weeks):

(a) There is a category of arguments that aim to pinpoint a contradiction in global scepticism.

For instance, let's take the sceptic who asserts that there is no knowledge. One argument against him says that when a speaker asserts that p, she presents herself as someone who knows that p. Thus the sceptic, on the one hand, explicitly says that there is no knowledge and, on the other, presents himself as someone who has some knowledge. The sceptic can answer the argument by denying the premiss on which it is based. He can say that when a speaker asserts that p, she presents herself as someone who believes what she is saying; she does not necessarily present herself as someone whose belief constitutes knowledge. (But then, the issue is reduced to a problem in philosophy of language: what are the essential characteristics of the linguistic practice of asserting.)

Another argument, of the same category, against the sceptic who asserts that there is no knowledge is the following: When the sceptic says to us, 'There is no knowledge', he want us to understand his words (and also agree). But 'understand the words' is another way of saying 'know what they mean'. Thus the sceptic wants us to acquire a certain piece of linguistic knowledge!

Let's now take the sceptic who puts forward some reasoning in favour of the proposition that no belief is justified. The argument against him is that, by putting his reasoning forward, he presents the premisses as premisses which justify the conclusion of the reasoning. So he indirectly tells us that a certain belief (that expressed by the conclusion) is justified.

Global sceptics can escape at least some arguments of that category by somewhat softening the global character of their scepticism. Rather than assert that we cannot know anything, they can claim that we cannot know anything except the size of our incapacity for knowledge. And rather than assert 'No belief is justified', they can assert 'No belief is justified except certain beliefs that concern the absence or impossibility of justification'.

(b) Some sceptical arguments employ the concept *it may be that ... , perhaps ...*, and especially include inferences of the form 'It may be that p. Hence we do not know that not-p' or the form 'It may be that not-p. Hence we do not know that p'. It can be argued that there is a sleight of hand in the way in which sceptical argument employ that concept:

When we say something of the form 'it may be that ...', there is an implicit reference to a body of information; our words are true iff that information leaves the eventuality we described open. The context of our discourse specifies (though not with absolute precision) what is the relevant body; it usually consists in the information available to the speaker. The same eventuality may be left open by a body of information, but excluded by a broader body of information. It makes no sense to wonder whether an eventuality is open absolutely, without reference to any body of information. So when the sceptic says 'It may be that p', her previous words and her tone show that the relevant body of information

consists in the information that is entirely certain. But then, she is not entitled to conclude 'We do not know that not-p'. She is only entitled to conclude 'It is not absolutely certain that not-p'. The things that are absolutely certain are extremely few. The things I know may very well be far more.

(c) A usual answer to the sceptical argument with the brains in a vat is the following: As the sceptic points out, whether we are brains in a vat or whether our sensory representations are produced in the normal way, our experiences are exactly the same. But then, it does not matter to us at all which of the two cases obtains. Nor does it matter whether we know or do not know which case obtains.

I think that that answer is insufficient because it ignores the second part of the argument in question. The second part aims to show that many of the beliefs we have about our environment and our place in it do not constitute knowledge. If all those beliefs are indeed not knowledge, then this matters in that we overestimate our knowledge very much.

(d) Many of the beliefs disputed by the sceptic concern the objects around us and, more generally, the so-called external world. The dispute becomes possible because we consider that the evidence supporting those beliefs does not directly concern that world but our experiences (what we see, what we hear, etc.). So, as we consider that there is some distance between the evidence and the beliefs supported by the evidence, we allow the sceptic to claim that the distance is an unbridgeable gap. Phenomenalism and idealism (in the sense of the term in which idealism is the opposite of realism about the objects we perceive) are two philosophical theories that tackle scepticism by arguing that there is no distance between the evidence that concerns our experiences and the beliefs that concern the so-called external world; that is, both the evidence and the beliefs concern the same things.

According to idealism, the objects that make up that world (tables, rooms, planets, etc.) are themselves mental representations, or ideas, within our minds. All that exists is minds and contents of minds. (Hence, the so-called external world is not external). Thus the evidence supporting our beliefs about the objects in question concerns those objects directly, they do not concern any ideas that are not identical with them. The most typical representative of idealism is Berkeley (18th century). One basic problem for him was to say what happens to the tables, planets, etc. when we neither observe them nor think about them. Don't they exist then? Berkeley replied that they exist then too, as ideas, but only within God's mind.

According to phenomenalism, the sentences that describe the so-called external world can be analysed (without any change in their sense) into sentences that concern our experiences (or at least into sentences that concern what experiences we would have under various circumstances). Hence, in the end, our beliefs about that world are beliefs about experiences. Phenomenalism was developed in the context of logical positivism, but it was finally abandoned, since its supporters did not manage to offer a convincing analysis of any sentences of the former category into sentences of the latter.