Scepticism

Show me data
SKEPTICISM

"THE THING ABOUT USING QUOTES FROM THE INTERNET IS HOW CHALLENGING IT CAN BE TO CONFIRM THEIR VALIDITY."

-- Abraham Lincoln --
Limited vs. Radical Scepticism

• Philosophers see scepticism as a very good thing.
  – (Up to a point.)

• Scepticism makes philosophers concerned when it becomes ‘extreme’, or ‘radical’, and leads to doubt about:
  – The reality of the external world
  – The existence of other minds
  – The approximate truth of settled science
  – The existence of the past, etc.
Scepticism vs. Anti-realism

• We will use ‘scepticism’ to mean an epistemological claim:
  – “While there is a fact of the matter about A, we cannot know whether or not A is true.”

• Just to be confusing, ‘scepticism’ sometimes refers to anti-realism (a metaphysical claim):
  – “There is no fact of the matter about A.”

• E.g. the term “moral sceptic” often refers to a moral anti-realist.
The sceptical point of attack

• Sceptics claim that we do not know some propositions \( p \) that are usually taken to be known.

• The point of attack is that our belief that \( p \) is not justified, or not sufficiently justified.
The Possibility of Error Argument

4-1. For (almost) any belief any person has about the external world, that belief could be mistaken.

4-2. If a belief could be mistaken, then it is not a case of knowledge.

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4-3. Therefore, (almost) any belief any person has about the external world is not knowledge (i.e., no one knows anything, or more than very little, about the external world). (4-1), (4-2)
• What does it mean to say that the belief “could be mistaken”?
  – E.g. Descartes’ dream scenario, brain in a vat, etc. are *epistemically possible*. 
The Introspective Indistinguishability argument

5-1. If a person can have knowledge on the basis of fallible evidence, then there can be cases of knowledge that are “introspectively indistinguishable” from cases of nonknowledge.

5-2. But there cannot be cases of knowledge that are introspectively indistinguishable from cases of nonknowledge.

5-3. \( \therefore \) A person cannot have knowledge on the basis of fallible evidence. (5-1), (5-2)

5-4. But all the evidence we have for any propositions about the external world is fallible.

5-5. We cannot have any knowledge about the external world. (5-3), (5-4)
• E.g.
  a. Black is innocent.
  b. White is innocent

• With the “there are sheep in this field” case, compare two scenarios:
  i. You’re looking at a sheep
  ii. You’re looking at a wolf in sheep’s clothing

• Is it reasonable to say that you have knowledge in case (i) but not (ii)?
The Certainty Argument

6-1. If S knows p, then S is absolutely certain of p.
6-2. No one is ever absolutely certain of anything about the external world.

(6-1), (6-2)
Deductive closure principle

• The set of propositions one knows, at a given time, is “closed under deductive consequence”.
  – One knows all of the (known) logical consequences of what one knows.

• If \{K(p) & K(p \implies q)\} then K(q)
Sceptical Scenarios

• These are imagined situations that, if true, would lead to (roughly or exactly) the same impressions (ideas, sense-data) that we have now.

  – The moon landings were faked by NASA.
  – I am a brain in a vat.
  – A Cartesian demon is deceiving me.
  – The earth was created 6,000 years ago, but made to look much older.

(Etc.)
Sceptical scenarios

• A sceptical scenario (SK) is a possible situation that
  – Is consistent with all available (cognitively accessible) evidence, and
  – Is inconsistent with some beliefs that you take to be knowledge.

• E.g. let $p =$ “here is one hand”, and SK = “I’m a brain in a vat”.
  – Then you know that (SK) $\Rightarrow \lnot p$.
  – Equivalently, you know that $p \Rightarrow \lnot (SK)$
E.g. Can we be sure this didn’t happen?
Is there any *evidence* against this?
Wait ... I could be a ... brain in a vat?

(Hilary Putnam’s version of the Cartesian demon.)
• Maybe I’m in one of those pods right now?
Transmissibility Argument

7-1. S cannot know that (SK) is false.
7-2. $p$ implies that (SK) is false, and S knows this.
7-3. If S knows that $p$ is true, and that $p$ implies that (SK) is false, then S can know that (SK) is false.

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7-4. S does not know $p$. (7-1)-(7-3)
G. E. Moore attacks scepticism

“Is it, in fact, as certain that all these four assumptions [the premises of the argument under consideration] are true, as that I do know that this is a pencil and that you are conscious? I cannot help answering:

It seems to me more certain that I do know that this is a pencil and that you are conscious, than that any single one these four assumptions is true, let alone all four.”
• In other words, Moore “does a modus tollens” on the sceptic’s modus ponens.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modus Ponens</th>
<th>Modus Tollens</th>
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<tr>
<td>If $p$ then $q$</td>
<td>If $p$ then $q$</td>
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<td>$P$</td>
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<td>$q$</td>
<td>Not $p$</td>
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• Given that I do know that this a pencil, I should conclude that one of the premises 7-1, 7-2 or 7-3 is false.

• (E.g. perhaps I do know that (SK) is false, or maybe the closure principle is wrong.)
Nevertheless, many readers are disappointed with Moore’s response. Some think that, in one way or another, it fails to engage the arguments for skepticism. Perhaps the best way to put the complaint about the Moorean response is to say that it does not explain what is wrong with the arguments for skepticism. His view implies, quite plausibly, that there is something wrong with them. It is desirable to have an explanation of just what is wrong with them.”
From an externalist perspective

• According to proper functionalism, the premise 7-1 (S cannot know that (SK) is false) is false, exactly as Moore says. A healthy brain in a normal environment will believe that it is not a brain in a vat.

• According to Nozick, the premise 7-3 (closure principle) is false.

• Externalist views therefore claim to complete Moore’s response by explaining the flaw in the sceptical argument.
Is scepticism self-refuting?

E.g. John Locke:

- Nobody, I think, can genuinely be so sceptical as to be uncertain of the existence of the things that he sees and feels; and if anyone can doubt as much as that, he will never have any controversy with me, for he can never be sure I say anything that he disagrees with because he can’t even be sure that I exist.
Replies:

• “Hey, they’re your premises, not mine!”
  – (Respond to the argument, don’t attack the person)

• “Well, I do believe these things, but I don’t claim to know them.”
Falliblism

• Consider an example in which two people are driving away from their house. One of them asks the other if he knows that he locked the door as they went out. He replies that he does.

• The first then asks if he is “absolutely certain” that he locked it, so certain that nothing could be more certain. He might sensibly reply that he is not. He has not thereby gone back on his first answer. If this is right, it is because the second question—the one about absolute certainty—was a new question, raising an issue not raised by the original question about knowledge. If so, then knowledge does not require absolute certainty.

• N.B. “absolute certainty” = 100% justification
Fallibilism

• N.B. Fallibilism can be accommodated within internalism, e.g. the JTB theory.
  – Knowledge requires a true belief with a very high degree of justification (but does not require 100% justification).

• Fallibilism is also a feature of all externalist theories that don’t even make justification a condition for knowledge.
  – If justification isn’t necessary for knowledge, then 100% justification isn’t necessary!
• N.B. Feldman seems to have in mind only the JTB fallibilist in this chapter.

• E.g. clarifying fallibilism, Feldman says

  “They are saying that knowledge requires strong justification and truth.” (and “no Gettier-like funny business”)

• Also, in considering principle (4-2) “If a belief could be mistaken, then it is not a case of knowledge.” Feldman considers only the epistemic possibility of a mistake, not the objective possibility.
Is infallibilism based on confusion?

(See Feldman pp. 124-5)

• It seems right to say that:
  “if S knows that $p$, then $p$ cannot be false”.

• (Truth is a necessary condition for knowledge.)

• In modal logic this is:
  $\Box (S \text{ knows } p \rightarrow p \text{ isn’t false})$
• But “if S knows that p, then p cannot be false” is ambiguous. It could be read as:

• $(S$ knows $p \rightarrow \square(p$ isn’t false$))$.

$\square(A \rightarrow B)$ vs. $(A \rightarrow \square B)$. See the difference?
(The necessity of the consequence vs. the necessity of the consequent.)

E.g. see the fallacy here?
-- “Fred could have gotten married last fall.”
-- “Nonsense. Fred is a bachelor. Bachelors are necessarily unmarried. Therefore Fred is necessarily unmarried.”
Is infallibilism based on confusion?

• The second interpretation of “if S knows that \( p \), then \( p \) cannot be false”, i.e. S knows \( p \rightarrow \Box(p \text{ isn’t false}) \), says that knowledge is infallible.

• Is this why infallibilism sounds right?
**Introspective Indistinguishability Argument**

- 5-2. There cannot be cases of knowledge that are introspectively indistinguishable from cases of nonknowledge.
- (N.B. Feldman, being fallible, refers to this as 6-2!)

- JTB fallibilists reject this (as do externalists).
- For JTB fallibilists, having a JB may well be a mental state, *but the ‘T’ part is external.*
- True beliefs do not have a brighter “glow” than false beliefs. There is not a blinking “T” before your mind’s eye when you have a true belief …
Knowledge about knowledge?

8-1. If fallibilism is true, then a person can never tell whether or not she has knowledge (i.e., she never knows that she has knowledge).

8-2. Fallibilism is true.

8-3. So a person never knows that she has knowledge. (8-1), (8-2)

(KK)  \[ K(p) \implies K(K(p)) \]

Even if we reject KK, surely we want to allow that we sometimes know that we know something? So why accept 8-1? Can’t knowledge about knowledge be fallible too?
Fallibilists on transmissibility

Here fallibilists say that we do know that the skeptical hypotheses are false. Your reasons for thinking ordinary things such as that you have arms also provide you with excellent reasons for rejecting skeptical hypotheses such as that you are a brain in a vat. There is no reason to think that there are any brains in vats at all, nor that you are one of them. It is an hypothesis that you have excellent reasons to reject. True, those reasons are not logically perfect, but you no more need logically perfect reasons in this case than you need them in any other case. The same goes for the other skeptical hypotheses.
• Is this true? Do we have “excellent reasons to reject” all the sceptical scenarios?

• It is usually stipulated that the sceptical scenarios are *empirically equivalent* to the standard realist theory.

• Hence there is no empirical evidence against the sceptical scenario, and the JTB fallibilist must rely on *a priori* arguments.

• E.g. Descartes used innate knowledge, innate ideas and ‘the natural light’ (reasoning) to show that the senses are reliable. Here we’re on shaky ground!
Contrast: imperfect illusion

• In the scenario of NASA faking the moon landings, the illusion is likely to be imperfect, so we can use empirical evidence as well as reason to investigate the truth of the sceptical scenario.
Empirical data

• In video footage, we observe the path of the dust kicked up by the rover wheels.
Reasoning

Dust follows a different path in a vacuum, compared to in air.

Fig. 7. Comparison of the measured dust trajectory (clip 1) and calculated trajectories. Squares represent measurements. The upper solid curve is the trajectory calculated using our value of $g_M$; the lower solid curve is the trajectory calculated using the true lunar gravitational field strength. For comparison, the dashed curves show the trajectories of 100 μm and 200 μm radius dust particles on Earth with the effects of air drag taken into account via Eq.
Inductive Scepticism

• Another thing to be sceptical about is scientific knowledge, or more generally any knowledge that goes beyond immediate experience.
  – Knowledge of the future
  – Knowledge of the distant past
  – Knowledge of structures too small to see (etc.)

• According to Hume, fallibilism by itself does *nothing* to blunt the edge of inductive scepticism.
But probable reasoning, if I have described it accurately, can’t provide us with the argument we are looking for. According to my account, all arguments about existence are based on the relation of cause and effect; our knowledge of that relation is derived entirely from experience; and in drawing conclusions from experience we assume that the future will be like the past. So if we try to prove this assumption by probable arguments, i.e. arguments regarding existence, we shall obviously be going in a circle, taking for granted the very point that is in question.

(Enquiry, Section 4, Part 2)
Lottery argument against JTB fallibilism

- Suppose you buy one lottery ticket, out of a total of 100,000 that are sold.
- The winning ticket will be determined by a fair, random draw.
- Being rational, you strongly believe that \( \neg W \) (“I won’t win”)
- The epistemic probability of \( \neg W \) is 0.99999
- Your belief in true. (Sadly)

- Did you know that you wouldn’t win?