

SCEPTICISM, KNOWLEDGE AND BELIEF

The following views are normally held concerning scepticism:

1. It is assumed that scepticism argues that certain knowledge, on rational grounds, is impossible.¹
2. It is assumed that the sceptical argument, however pessimistic in conclusion, is self defeating.²
3. It is assumed that scepticism does indeed show the impossibility of any rationally founded "rock bottom" epistemological certainty.³
4. It is assumed that scepticism, however inherently futile and self defeating, offers sound motivation for a "fallibilistic" methodology⁴ or, sometimes, a "doxastic" epistemology, an epistemology that deals not with knowledge, but with rational, revisable beliefs.⁵

These assumptions can be considered to constitute the essential core of extant epistemological paradigms in the Anglo Saxon world of philosophy.

In the present paper, I will argue that all these views stem from a misunderstanding of scepticism, and that they are all false. To do that, I will reconstruct scepticism as an argument that establishes two positive conclusions:

1. Certain knowledge is possible, as an instance of it can be demonstrated.
2. Knowledge is not a form of rational belief under any description or designation, hence all search for "doxastic" epistemology, of any form—paradigm based,⁶ fallibilistic⁷ or inductivistic⁸, is vain.

Section 1 : The sceptical argument

I will first reconstruct the sceptical argument as traditionally understood. The reconstruction will be inspired by recent formulation of Popper⁹ and Oakley¹⁰ even though it will be independent of both, and simplified.

(1) To justify the acceptance of a belief, one must adduce evidence for it.

(2) The evidence for a belief, is ultimately, either totally or partially *other beliefs*. Even in the case where sense perception is

offered as "evidence," extra beliefs concerning the settings of the observation in question (the non-existence of perceptual distortions due to deceptive devices, unsuspected drug intoxication, hypnosis, etc.) must be included to validate the relevance of the "sensory evidence."

(3) Thus, the rational acceptance of every belief requires the rational acceptance of those other beliefs which are offered as evidence for it. If the evidence is uncritically endorsed, without its endorsement satisfying the requirement of rationality, why could one not, in the same vein, accept the original belief without further ado? On the ground of irrationally accepted evidence, one can then rationalize the acceptance of any belief whatsoever. After all, to accept the belief P "rationally", one only need to accept P first as evidence for itself, and then to deduce it from itself.

(4) The rational acceptance of the beliefs which are included in the evidence for the original belief will require, therefore, evidence for the evidence. Namely, second order evidence.

(5) The evidence for the evidence cannot in turn be accepted dogmatically, as such acceptance would allow irrationality all the way. If the evidence for the evidence is to be accepted dogmatically, one could simply accept the evidence of the first order dogmatically as evidence for itself, namely, in the role of second order evidence, and then deduce it from itself.

(6) The evidence for the evidence cannot include any belief whose rational endorsement is still questionable. If, say, one uses E as evidence for H and then F as evidence for E, but F contains H, then to accept F, one must already accept H. However, had one accepted H, there would be no need for considering E in the first place, hence no need to consider F.

(7) The evidence for the evidence must, therefore, be accepted independently of both the evidence and the original belief. Hence, it must be accepted on independent grounds, if it is to be accepted rationally. This would require third order evidence. (Evidence for the evidence for the evidence).

(8) Thus, the process of justification, which is now barred from circularity or dogmatism is a regress to infinity. Such a regress cannot be accomplished. Hence, the quest for justification is futile.

Section 2 : Misunderstandings of the sceptical argument

It is normally assumed that the sceptical argument involves also, as an "obvious" premise (9) :

(9) Knowledge is rationally justified belief.

If (9) is true, then we can deduce from (9) the following

(10) Nothing can ever be known.

However, reflecting on the perfect rationality of the process leading us to (10) we are led to (11).

(11) We know that nothing can ever be known.

(11) is obviously self defeating. It is a short process to represent it as a formal contradiction.¹¹ Thus, (11) is normally used to argue that scepticism is self-defeating. However, since the argument leading to (11) seems impeccable, it is taken as a motivation to relax the restrictions on "justification" expressed through (1) to (7). Perhaps justification can be circular, provided that one uses "wide" circles. Perhaps it can be dogmatic, if the fundamental dogmas one resorts to are "constitutive of a paradigm". Perhaps the whole quest for knowledge in the sense of absolute cognitive achievement is just vain and must be given up.

However, it is important to note that the contradictory (11) does not follow from the sceptical argument itself. It follows only when (9) is added.

Section 3 : The true import of scepticism

Given the logical situation discussed in section 2, it is obvious that scepticism is simply a foundation for the rejection of (9). (9) expresses the identification of knowledge as a kind of belief.¹² It is not an essential part of the argument of section 1, but an added premise. It follows from the constraints of naturalism. If one indeed believes that cognition involves a "mental representation" of an "external reality",¹³ that "reaches the mind" through sense perception,¹⁴ or even if one believes, with Popper,¹⁵ that cognition involves testing beliefs held within the mind against the external world, one is forced to acknowledge that the only mode of cognition conceivable for man is *Belief*, and that the essence of rationality, therefore, involves sifting beliefs and distinguishing the "justified" ones from the "unjustified" ones. (9) encapsulates this conception.

However, (9) leads to the self contradiction (11), and so must be rejected. Indeed, since (9) implies a contradiction, we see evidently the truth of (12).

(12) Knowledge is no kind of justified belief.

The motivation for (12) is obvious. Had knowledge been a mode of justified belief, we could know that knowledge was impossible, which is absurd. Thus (12) is rigorously proved through a *reductio ad absurdum*.

However, another conclusion follows from our exposition. (13).

(13) we know that no beliefs are ever justifiable.

(13) has been rigorously established through (1) to (8). As (8) has been rigorously established through a flawless argument, that involves an essential reflection on the process of attempted justification of beliefs, we can know its truth. The expression of this knowledge is (13).

(13) implies (14), in an obvious manner. If we know something, knowledge exists.

(14) Knowledge is possible, as it exists at least in one instance (*viz.* 13). Thus, rather than suggesting the impossibility of knowledge, the sceptical argument demonstrates its existence, hence its possibility, at the same time showing where it cannot be found : it cannot be found in the attempt to find modes of justification of beliefs.

However, the conclusions (13) and (14) imply the inherent absurdity of naturalistic epistemology of all kinds. Be in an "empiricistic" naturalism of the Lockean kind or a sophisticated "Kuhnian" naturalism, all forms of naturalism must ultimately assume a representationalistic conception of cognition, as they assume that man can know only through a sensory interaction with his environment, and then through subsequent processing of the input derived through this primary interaction. Accounts of the precise logical structures embodied in these natural processes varies: inductivism and deductivism *a la* Popper are just two such accounts among many possible variations. However, all such accounts lead to some version of (9), and (9) is exactly what the sceptical argument refutes conclusively, in the most rigorous fashion.

Section 4 : Is Agnostic epistemology possible ?

By "agnostic epistemology" I mean epistemology that misinterpretes scepticism as demonstrating the impossibility of *Gnosis* namely, Certain Knowledge, and that tries to make do without it. We have seen that this "foundation" is due to misunderstanding and indeed self defeating. One cannot interpret scepticism as a demonstration of the impossibility of knowledge without getting entangled in the reflective paradox (11). However, motivations aside, is there any conceivable logical future for "agnostic epistemology"?

A very short reflection suffices here. If one dispenses altogether with the concept of knowledge, one cannot even have access to belief. After all, to state a belief, I must either know that I possess it, or merely believe so. The first possibility is ruled out. Thus I can only believe that I believe something, or rather believe that I believe that I believe or . . . etc. One cannot assert anything at all, because to assert it as first order belief is unjustifiable : there is only a (second order) belief that it is believed. One cannot, of course, assert it as a second order belief, for the same reason: an assertion of this kind cannot be known, but can only be believed through a third order belief. Thus, for any attempt to assert a belief of the order (n), one cannot assert it, because he is compelled to resort to a belief of the order (n+1). Thus, this amounts to a rigorous proof, by induction over the order of beliefs, that no beliefs can ever be asserted.¹⁶ One has no "epistemic access" to his beliefs.

Thus, if one gives us the possibility of using *knowledge* as a key epistemological concept, if one opts for "agnosticism" in this fundamental area, one cannot use the concept of belief too, in any rational manner. One can simply claim *arbitrarily* that he believes so and so, without any conceivable grounds. But then, the door is open to all forms of arbitrariness, and all hope for rationality is irrevocably lost. In other words, if one takes (9) seriously, *even if "knowledge" is understood to be "tentative" and not "absolute", "corrigible" and not "certain"*, the sceptical argument produces exactly the total epistemological chaos that its pessimistic proponents take it to produce. Naturalistically inspired epistemology, in other words, is not only founded on a simple mistake, but cannot genuinely take off the ground. It can only *pretend* to take off the ground.

Section 5 : Conclusion

Thus, scepticism is not a pessimistic anti-epistemology. Scepticism is the first step towards a fully satisfactory epistemology. It guarantees the possibility of success in the quest for certain knowledge, by illustrating its existence. It also guards the seeker from the false path enjoined by naturalistic prejudice: the path conflating knowledge with some mode of belief. *All Belief is Irrational*. Knowledge has nothing to do with belief.

But what then is knowledge? Clearly, one cannot expect scepticism to do the whole job. It can only be expected to offer a guarantee for success, as well as to hint the path of search. The path of the epoche, the renunciation of all beliefs. It behooves us now to address ourselves to study those philosophers who, free of naturalistic (and supernaturalistic) prejudice, started with scepticism as their path to knowledge. Husserl, first and foremost,¹⁷ and his historical quasi mentor, Descartes¹⁸ at second instance.

Scepticism is the path from confused "commonsense" rationality with its naturalistic presupposition to radically purified, phenomenological rationality.

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NOTES

1. Cf. Popper, K. R., *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, Harper Torchbooks, 1959, p. 46.
2. Cf. Kroy, M., "Oakley's scepticism". *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 1981, 59, 4, 438-441.
3. Cf. Popper, *ibid*.
4. Popper, K. R., *Objective Knowledge*, Oxford University Press, 1972, Chap. 1.
5. Cf. Ellis, B., *Rational Belief Systems*, Oxford University Press, 1980.
6. Cf. Kuhn, T., "Logic of discovery or psychology of Research" in Lakatos, I. and Musgrave, A. (eds.), *Criticism And The Growth Of Knowledge*, Cambridge University Press, 1970.
7. Cf. Popper *ibid*, (both books).

8. Cf. for instance papers by Hintikka, Selmon, Sellers, Jeffrey in Rescher et al (eds.), *Essays in honour of Carl G. Hempel, Reidel*, 1969.
9. Cf. Popper, *Logic of Scientific Discovery*, *ibid*, 93 ff.
10. Cf. Oakley, I. T., "An argument for scepticism concerning justified beliefs", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 13, 3, (1976), 221-228.
11. Cf. Kroy, *ibid*.
12. This is exactly "paradigm thinking".
13. Cf. Popper, *Objective Knowledge*, *ibid*, Chap. 2.
14. Cf. Russell B., *An Inquiry Into Meaning And Truth*, Pelican, 1967.
15. Cf. Popper, *Objective Knowledge*, *ibid*, Appendix.
16. The more explicit presentation of the proof is as follows :
 Theorem: Nobody can ever assert any of his beliefs.
 Proof : To accomplish the proof, let us first define by induction the meaning of the " order of a belief ".
 Definition: A belief of the first order is a belief that does not concern other beliefs.
 A belief of the order $n+1$ is a belief concerning the existence of a belief of order n .
 Now it can be seen that every belief has some non zero order.
 To assert a belief of order 1 , one must have *knowledge* of it.
 However, given that no knowledge is possible, only belief, a first order belief cannot be asserted, only a second order belief about the first order belief.
 Similarly, no belief of the order n can be asserted, because to assert it one must know its existence. However, one can only believe its existence, hence hold and assert a belief of the order $n + 1$.
 Thus, by induction our n for all n , a belief of the order n cannot be asserted.
 Thus as all beliefs have some order, no beliefs can ever be asserted. This proof is merely a scepticism applying to one's own access to one's own cognitive reality, namely, one's beliefs. It shows that without any concept of *knowledge* the concept of belief cannot even be applied.
17. Cf. Husserl *E. Cartesian Meditations* Martinus Nijhoff 1977 Chapter 1.
18. Cf. Descartes R. *Meditations on First Philosophy* in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes* Cambridge University Press 1911 Vol. I.

