

Evidence and Scepticism



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EVIDENCE AND SCEPTICISM

Philosophical scepticism continues to be the focus of much contemporary philosophical debate. According to philosophical scepticism about the external world, one lacks knowledge of the existence of such external objects as chairs, tables, trees, valleys and rivers. While it is controversial just what the sceptic's argument is for this surprising conclusion, one strand of sceptical argument exploits the idea that knowledge demands evidence meeting especially tough standards together with the idea that our evidence is very limited. While perhaps the dominant philosophical response to this kind of sceptical argument has been to reject the suggestion that knowledge is so demanding, I here consider a more recent response which holds that we have much more evidence than the sceptic suggests. I argue that even if we do have much more evidence than the sceptic allows, this will not provide an answer to a range of important sceptical arguments concerning knowledge from testimony, induction and inference to the best explanation. Instead, I suggest we need to reject the idea that knowledge is as demanding as the sceptic suggests. In particular, we need to endorse 'fallibilism' according to which a subject can know a claim on the basis of evidence even if that evidence does not guarantee or entail the truth of what is known.



In everyday life, we often talk of people being sceptical, or of scepticism, about various matters. For example, we might suggest that a key problem for modern Western democracy is that voters are sceptical of politicians and governments. So, when a major policy decision has to be taken, such as the decision to wage war on another country, voters are sceptical about the reasons politicians give for the decision. For example, voters might express scepticism about the defence minister's claim that the other country constitutes a threat to the home country, and whether the government's intention in going to war is the publicly described intention, say self-defence, or something else altogether. In this everyday context, scepticism often amounts to doubt about the truth of certain claims, e.g. that the other country is harbouring terrorists or that the aim of the war is self-defence. Further, in this everyday context, scepticism is usually very limited. Someone who is sceptical about claims made by politicians, for example, will not typically be sceptical about, say, the existence of external material objects such as tables and chairs, or of the existence of other people.

In these ways, regular everyday scepticism is very different from philosophical scepticism. Philosophical scepticism is not a mere expression of doubt, but rather concerns whether anyone can know or have a justified belief in a certain category of claim. In addition, philosophical scepticism is usually much more radical than everyday scepticism. Philosophical scepticism standardly targets whole categories of knowledge, rather than just the particular claims made by some individual. Rather than, say, challenging the claim made by some politician on some occasion, philosophical sceptics question whether anyone at all has knowledge or justified belief in propositions from some large range. We can illustrate this with perhaps one of the most well-known forms of philosophical scepticism, scepticism about the external world. This kind of

scepticism challenges anyone's having knowledge or justified belief about any material objects whatsoever, such as tables, chairs, buildings, trees, hills and valleys.

Such radical philosophical scepticism may well generate an impatient response. One source of impatience is the thought that philosophical scepticism has been a topic in philosophy from the time of ancient Greece to the present day. For example, different forms of scepticism were being discussed by the so-called Academy associated with Plato, as well as followers of Phyrro, from the third century BCE. Those outside philosophy may well ask why philosophy has not moved on to discuss other topics. In other disciplines, the subjects for discussion have changed massively over the years. For instance, ancient Greek medicine was not concerned with liver transplants and ancient astronomy and physics was not concerned with the existence of the Higgs-Boson.

A different source of impatience arises from the fact that philosophical scepticism often tends to polarise opinion. Arguments for philosophical scepticism often give rise to the response that the sceptic's conclusion is either obviously false (since we obviously have the knowledge the sceptic challenges) or, alternatively, obviously true (since we obviously lack it). But, many will see no point in considering arguments for claims about which they already have a decided opinion. Indeed, many philosophers currently working on philosophical scepticism have decided views on the truth of the sceptic's conclusion. Perhaps the majority opinion among contemporary epistemologists is that the sceptic's conclusion is incorrect. In considering scepticism, these philosophers' main concern is not so much the truth value of the sceptic's conclusion, but rather in carefully understanding the nature of the sceptic's argument for that conclusion, and what can be said for or against its premises. A better understanding of the sceptic's argument may help illuminate the very nature of knowledge, evidence, justification and their interrelations. Thus, even if one is already convinced that the sceptic's conclusion is incorrect, there is still much to be learned from examining sceptical arguments. Indeed, scepticism has been a fruitful and powerful spur for motivating a whole range of interesting and varied work in contemporary epistemology about the nature of knowledge, justification and evidence. Surprisingly for a topic which has been discussed since ancient times, contemporary philosophers are still learning new lessons from the sceptic's arguments.

A classic and perennially influential formulation of scepticism about the external world is provided in Descartes's famous *Meditations*. The *Meditations* start in what seems a non-radical way. Descartes notes that in his childhood he acquired many false beliefs, so decides that it is worthwhile to devote some time to reflect on his beliefs as a whole to make sure that they are in good standing. From this first thought, he moves quickly to consider the various main sources of his beliefs, including importantly sense perception. He notes that sense perception has sometimes led him astray. For example, one's sense of hearing might lead one mistakenly to think there is an intruder in the house in the middle of the night, even though it is just the cat who has knocked over a few dishes in the kitchen. Descartes then says, 'It is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once'. However, even he immediately worries that this is an overreaction. Compare the following example: my niece has occasionally told me an untruth. It does not follow that I should never trust her at all. So, Descartes accepts that scepticism about the external world is not well motivated by the fact that perception has occasionally deceived us. Instead, he motivates scepticism about the external world by considering two possibilities: the possibility that all his current sense experiences are in fact merely a dream, rather than perceptions of an external world; and the possibility that all his current sense experiences have been produced by an all-powerful but malicious demon who is attempting to deceive him.

It is contentious just how Descartes's consideration of the dreaming and evil demon hypothesis are supposed to undermine knowledge of the external world. However, one strand of thought in Descartes's writings, if not the only one, combines the idea that there are especially tough standards for having knowledge with the idea that our evidence for the existence of external objects is not strong enough to meet those standards. After all, if our evidence for the existence of external objects just consists in having certain kinds of sensory experiences, having those experiences is compatible not just with a world of external objects as we ordinarily think, but also with the radical sceptical hypothesis that those experiences are being produced by, say, an evil demon. But, if our evidence does not exclude the evil demon hypothesis, how can it enable us really to know that there are external world objects at all? For example, if I cannot rule it out that the evil demon is giving me illusory sensory experiences as of sitting in an office and writing this paper, how can I really know that I am sitting in an office writing a paper?

One way to analyse this reading of the sceptic's argument is to suggest that it combines a very demanding conception of knowledge with a very ungenerous conception of our evidence. As a contemporary philosopher might put it, it combines an 'infallibilist' conception of knowledge according to which one can know a claim, p , on the basis of some evidence, e , only if that evidence guarantees or entails the truth of p .¹ On the ungenerous conception, our evidence merely consists in having sensory experiences. But, so conceived, our evidence does not guarantee or entail claims about the external world. For, as we have seen, our having those experiences is compatible not just with there being an ordinary world of external objects but also with the evil demon hypothesis.

Conceived of in this way, there are two possible ways to respond to the sceptic. First, one could question the proposed requirement for knowledge, or alternatively one could question the sceptic's account of our evidence. Of these two options, the first has been by far the most popular in recent epistemology. A wide range of philosophers who disagree about the details of what is required for knowledge, nonetheless agree that one can know a proposition, p , on the basis of evidence, e , even if e doesn't entail or guarantee that p . This includes ordinary language philosophers such as Austin (1946); so-called 'externalists' such as relevant-alternatives theorists (e.g. Dretske, 1971), sensitivity theorists (e.g. Nozick, 1981) and safety theorists (e.g. Sosa, 1999). It also includes a number of defenders of so-called 'shifty-views' of knowledge whether contextualists who hold that whether it is true for one to claim knowledge depends on one's context (e.g. Cohen, 1988, and DeRose, 1992); relativists who claim that the truth of a claim to know depends on the standards of the assessor (e.g. MacFarlane, 2014); or defenders of pragmatic encroachment who claim that the truth of a claim to know depends not only on one's evidence but also how important it is to one that the claim is true (e.g. Hawthorne, 2004; Stanley, 2005; Fantl and McGrath, 2009). However, more recently, a minority view has emerged within contemporary philosophical discussions of scepticism. According to this minority view, the sceptic has misdescribed our evidence, taking it to be much more limited than it actually is. From this thin description of our evidence it is unsurprising that the sceptic goes on to claim that we lack knowledge. So on this view, we need not challenge the infallibilist conception of knowledge since it turns out that we have more evidence than we might have thought (e.g. McDowell, 1982; Williamson, 2000; Neta, 2003).

To get a feel for this more recent minority reply to the sceptic, consider how we ordinarily talk about evidence. Ordinarily, we do not hesitate to include claims about the external physical world, other minds, or past events as part of our evidence. For example, in coming to the conclusion that the dog ate the chocolate cake, I might point out as evidence that the chocolate cake was in the kitchen with the dog and that nobody else had access to the kitchen during the relevant time period. To take a different example, in coming to the conclusion that the accused carried

out the murder, we might cite such facts as fingerprint evidence, the accused's motivations, as well as claims about the location and timing of the accused's movements just before and after the murder. From this perspective, the sceptic's claim that our evidence just consists of sensory experiences can seem bizarre (e.g. Williamson, 2000; Kelly, 2008). Why should we restrict our evidence in this way? Furthermore, if we stick with a more ordinary conception of what our evidence consists in, we may think that we can respond to sceptical arguments even without challenging the sceptic's conception of what knowledge demands. For instance, if my evidence includes such claims as that I am now sitting at a desk writing at a computer, then my evidence does entail that there are physical objects outside of me, such as the desk and the computer. So, we might conclude that the sceptic was just wrong to worry that our evidence is too thin for us to have knowledge of external objects. Rather, once properly conceived, our evidence is so rich that it does indeed entail the claims that we ordinarily take ourselves to know.

At this point, the sceptic might intervene and say that she is utterly unsatisfied with this response to her arguments. More broadly, she might point out that anybody assailed by sceptical doubt is hardly likely to be convinced by this reply. For, anybody so assailed just will not grant that our evidence includes claims about the physical world, other minds and the past. Further, the sceptic might accuse the response of begging the question at issue. According to the proposed response, our evidence includes claims about external world objects, such as the claim that I am now sitting at a desk writing. But, the sceptic claims that her argument has already put these claims in jeopardy so it is not reasonable for us to rely on them in replying to her argument.

In order to adjudicate this dispute between the sceptic and the non-sceptic, we need to consider what it takes to reasonably defend a position against attack. The mere fact that the sceptic is not likely to be persuaded by our argument is not a very strong point in the sceptic's favour. We can all think of examples of subjects who will never be convinced by some claim no matter how strongly supported by the evidence. For example, consider some current scientific hypotheses, say about the causes of climate change. The fact that not everyone will agree with some hypothesis about the cause of climate change does not in itself show that it is not justified. To take a different example, a parent might not believe that their children are guilty of some crime no matter how strongly supported by the evidence. Again, the fact that we cannot convince the parent does not show we do not have justification for the charge against the children. Thus, it is not an appropriate test of whether one knows or has justification for some claim that everyone would agree with it.

However, it may be that the sceptic is making a different kind of point. On the proposed response, we attempt to reply to the sceptic by appealing to our ordinary common-sense view of evidence as including claims about the physical world, other minds and the past. But, the sceptic is challenging our right to do that. This raises tricky and subtle questions about the rules for reasonable debate. We can compare intellectual debate to physical battle. Whether one wins a battle in part depends on who occupies the high ground and what are the rules of engagement. For example, it is typically easier to defend a castle from within than to take it from outside, where that might involve getting over the moat and scaling the walls even while those defending the castle pour boiling oil on one's head. Similarly in intellectual battles: we need to ask the question of who occupies the high ground, and what are the rules of engagement. The sceptic wants to persuade us that she occupies the high ground and determines the rules of the engagement. On her view, the battle is to be fought on the following lines: our evidence is just our sensory experience, and knowledge demands proof. If we allow her to determine the rules of engagement in this way, we are lost. For, of course, having a sensory experience as of sitting on a chair writing at a computer does not entail that there is any such chair or computer. But we

might challenge her view of the rules of engagement and instead suggest that we are entitled to retain our common-sense view of our evidence until she has justifiably overthrown it. But, we may argue, she has not done that. And, from within our common-sense view, we can see to our own satisfaction that we do have knowledge of the external world since we have evidence that entails there are physical external objects.

Even if appeals to a generous conception of evidence as a response to the sceptic can be defended in this way, important questions remain to be addressed. In particular, we might wonder whether appeal to a generous picture of evidence will enable us to respond to the wide variety of sceptical arguments there are. To the extent that we see sceptics about knowledge in a variety of domains as exploiting a common argumentative structure, we would like to have a common response to them. But, we might worry that the move of appealing to a generous picture of evidence will not in fact answer a range of important sceptical arguments.

To highlight these concerns, first consider one important class of purported knowledge, knowledge by testimony. When philosophers talk of knowledge by testimony they mean knowledge gained broadly speaking from what people say. Thus, it concerns knowledge from books, electronic media, conversations, as well as more formal situations in which we might talk of testimony such as the courtroom. Now let us consider what our evidence is when we acquire beliefs from others in this way. Plausibly, our evidence is restricted to the fact that some other person said something at a certain time, perhaps together with background assumptions about the general reliability of what people say or what this person says in particular. If that is our evidence in this case, it seems hard to see how it can possibly meet the sceptic's requirement. While I might think that I know by testimony that, say, Ulaanbaatar is the capital of Mongolia, my evidence – namely that a reliable source said so – does not entail that it is. Perhaps, the reliable source was wrong on this occasion.

Similar difficulties affect other important kinds of knowledge, including knowledge by inference to the best explanation and knowledge by induction (Brown, 2013, 2015). We accept a claim on the basis of inference to the best explanation when it is the best explanation of some data, even if it is not the only one. To take a toy example, we might come to the conclusion that Charlotte committed the murder from our evidence that it was either Annabel, Beatrice or Charlotte; only Beatrice and Charlotte had a motivation and an opportunity; but given the nature of the murder, it would have been difficult for Beatrice but easy for Charlotte to carry it out. Concluding on this basis that Charlotte committed the murder is reasonable but of course our evidence does not entail or guarantee that she did it. It is still possible, if very unlikely, that Beatrice did it. Similar worries infect so-called knowledge by induction. Suppose that I predict that I will soon have an allergic reaction on the basis that my friend's cats have just jumped all over me, and every time I have had that kind of contact with a cat in the past, I have suffered an allergic reaction. We often use this kind of track-record reasoning in coming to conclusions about the future and the unobserved. But, of course in these cases what is intuitively my evidence does not guarantee what I claim to know. Perhaps, this time, I will not have an allergic reaction to this particular cat even though I have in every other past encounter with a cat.

It can seem, then, that an appeal to a generous conception of evidence cannot answer a range of important sceptical arguments. Furthermore, on the infallibilist conception of knowledge that the sceptic recommends, it is hard to see how we can have knowledge of these important kinds. We might then return to the more dominant response to scepticism, namely denying an infallibilist view of knowledge. Instead, we may suggest, one can know a claim on the basis of some evidence even if that evidence does not guarantee or entail the truth of the relevant claim.

Of course, merely to say that is not yet to provide a positive account of knowledge. That is a large task beyond the confines of this article. But, it may be useful just to sketch in outline what we may think of as a common strand in a range of contemporary work. According to this strand, knowledge of the claim, p , does not require that one can rule out all error possibilities, but only some of them. In particular, it might be said that in order to know that p , the following conditions must be met: 1) p must be true and 2) not easily could one have been wrong about this (e.g. Dretske, 1971, and Sosa, 1999). In other words, one has to rule out certain everyday error possibilities even if one cannot rule out such extraordinary error possibilities as the sceptic uses in her argument. While this view is tempting, it is only the start of the work required. For while it is plausible to say that knowledge does not require being able to rule out every kind of error possibility, nonetheless when we talk about knowledge we seem to move smoothly from error possibilities to denying knowledge claims. And this can seem puzzling if fallibilism is true.

For instance, it would seem odd to make the following conjunctive claim 'I know that Edinburgh is in Scotland, but it might not be'. In the second half of the sentence one seems to be taking back what one said in the first half. But, if knowledge does not require ruling out all error possibilities, why would that be? Similarly, we may ask why the admission of error possibilities leads so quickly to knowledge denial if fallibilism is true. For instance, suppose a witness in court starts out claiming that he recognises the accused as the man he saw on the night of the murder. If he is subsequently forced to admit that it is possible that the accused is not the man he saw on the night of the murder, it seems he will be forced into admitting that he does not really know that the accused is the man he saw that night after all. Again, we might ask, why are these transitions from accepting the possibility of error to the denial of knowledge so smooth if fallibilism is correct?²

Contemporary fallibilists such as myself need good answers to these questions. Part of what I have been doing while a fellow at the Institute of Advanced Studies in Durham is precisely to attempt to give a good account of how fallibilism may be true even though we seem so easily to slip from admitting the possibility of error to denying knowledge. A second large task is to try to respond to the ways in which infallibilists have attempted to answer the worries raised earlier for knowledge by testimony, inference to the best explanation and induction. Earlier I pointed out that, on a common-sense understanding of evidence, it seems that we just do not have enough evidence to have these kinds of knowledge if infallibilism is true. In response, infallibilists challenge that ordinary conception and have attempted to defend an even more generous conception of evidence. One way of filling out this thought reverses the standard approach in epistemology which traditionally has taken the strength of one's evidence to be an independent and prior test of whether one has knowledge. Instead, some recent philosophers reverse this direction of explanation and start with knowledge as what is basic in epistemology and thereby explain evidence and justification in turn (e.g. Williamson, 2000). Defenders of this knowledge-first approach suggest that if I do, for example, know that Ulaanbaatar is the capital of Mongolia by testimony, then that knowledge is part of my evidence. So, after all, I do have evidence which guarantees or entails what I know, namely that very claim itself (Williamson, 2000). So a second large part of the project I have undertaken while in Durham is to challenge the reconception of evidence offered by contemporary infallibilists in defence of their position.

Notes

¹ There are important and difficult questions about how best to formulate the contrast between fallibilism and infallibilism. For discussion, see Reed, 2002, and Fantl and McGrath, 2009.

² These worries motivate many infallibilists. For fallibilist replies see Lewis, 1996; Stanley, 2005a; Dougherty and Rysiew, 2009, and Fantl and McGrath, 2009.

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Insights

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