Epistemology

Lecture 8: Scepticism
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Chapter I: Preliminaries

Knowledge and its Limits

- **Central epistemological question**:

  What, if anything, can we know?

- Sceptics focus on answering this question in negative ways.

- They *deny* or *withhold assent to* the claim that we have knowledge or true belief about certain classes of things or even everything.

Academic scepticism

- Named thus by Sextus Empiricus after the Academy (428/427 - 83BCE), the school of philosophy founded by Plato.

- Among the claims made was that knowledge of the external world is *impossible*.

- This is against the stoics and the epicureans who claimed we do have knowledge.

Pyrrhonian scepticism

- Named thus by Sextus Empiricus after Pyrrho (ca. 365 – 275 BCE), this form of scepticism *withholds assent* to disputable propositions.

- Pyrrhonian sceptics argue that instead of claiming that we can/cannot have knowledge we must withhold assent to both.

- That is, they claim that it is *not known* or *decidable* whether something/anything can be known.

- The Pyrrhonian sceptic accuses academic sceptics of being as dogmatic as those who believe that we have knowledge.

Scepticism: A continuum?

- **Global scepticism**: We cannot know (or it's not decidable that we know) anything.

- **Local scepticism**: There is a class of things we cannot know (or it's not decidable that we know).

- There seems to be a continuum between the views:

Total

knowledge

Global

scepticism

Varying degrees of local to global scepticism
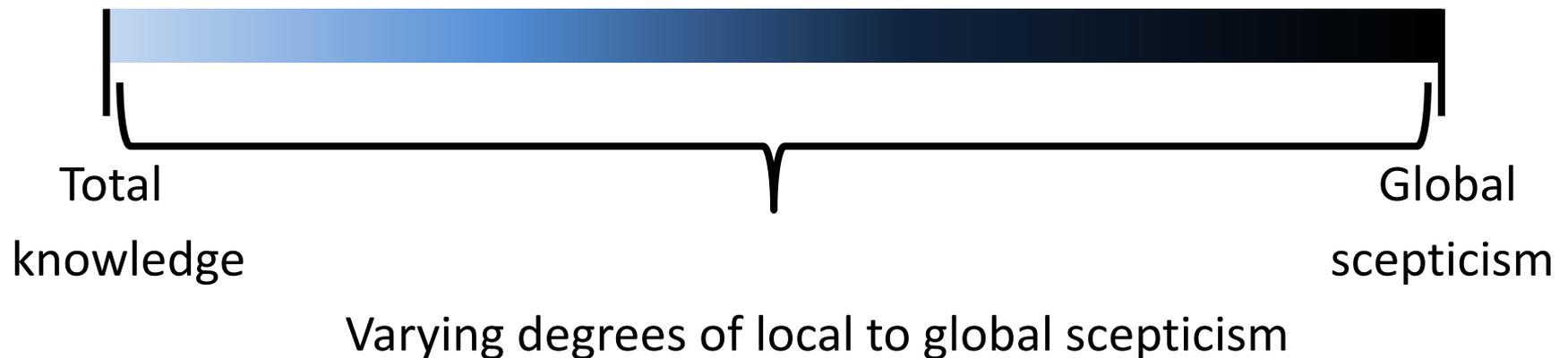
Motivating scepticism

- Many ways to motivate global and local scepticism. Through doubting:

(1) epistemic features of beliefs or knowledge:
(i) certainty, (ii) justifiability, (iii) rationality, etc.

(2) belief-generating mechanisms:
(i) induction, (ii) inference to the best explanation, (iii) causation, etc.

(3) domains of inquiry:
(i) external world, (ii) other minds, (iii) unobservables, etc.

(4) …

(…) Combinations thereof.

Knowledge and scepticism

- Views advocating knowledge of some kind are typically accompanied with arguments against some corresponding version(s) of scepticism.

- Such views do not, however, provide arguments against all forms of scepticism – especially not global scepticism.

- Rather, they start from certain (undefended by them) suppositions that frame the discussion.

  Example: Scientific realists vs. constructive empiricists.

Pyrrhonian scepticism

denies that we have knowledge

withholds assent to claims that we know

Chapter II:
The Sceptical Challenge

Early counters: Moore

- G.E. Moore (1939) attempts to demonstrate the existence of the external world through the existence of certain external world objects.

Moore's argument:

1. Here are my hands.

2. There are at least two objects in the external world.

3. Thus, the external world exists.

NB: This is a metaphysical, not an epistemological argument.

Problem: The two premises are accused of being question-begging.

Early counters: Descartes

- Descartes puts forth two great sceptical scenarios: a dream scenario and an evil demon scenario. In both, our senses are being deceived.

- How do we overcome the doubt generated by such scenarios?

- **Cartesian answer**: 'I think, therefore I am'. That is, at least I exist as a thinking being.

  Problem 1: This presumably defeats the global sceptic but knowledge is pretty thin.

  Problem 2: To remove doubts, Descartes (but also sceptics) need reasoning.

Switched/possible world scepticism

- There are various modern analogues to the Cartesian evil demon.

- They involve "imagining oneself to be in some possible world that is both vastly different from the actual world and at the same time absolutely indistinguishable (at least by us) from the actual world" (Klein in SEOP entry on Skepticism).

- The upshot is that our experience is incapable of pulling us out of the thought that we may just be inhabiting the imagined world.

Brains-in-vats revisited

- A brain-in-a-vat (BIV) scenario is one such type of possible world scepticism.

  NB: At least one brain is presupposed here as well as someone or something that manipulates it. So global scepticism is ruled out!

- BIV scenarios are varied. Think of Nozick's man floating in a tank scenario. What's he stimulated to believe? Does he have knowledge?

Scepticism and underdetermination

- One way to understand such scenarios is that they raise doubt about our default hypothesis with an alternative.

  H_1: I'm giving an epistemology lecture at the NCH.

  H_2: I'm a BIV being stimulated to believe H_1.

- Why does the presence of H_2 make us doubt the truth of H_1?

- **Underdetermination thesis**: The sensory evidence is *exactly the same* in both cases and thus cannot help determine the right hypothesis.

More choices

- Indeed the choice is not restricted to H_1 and H_2. There seem to be indefinitely (and perhaps even infinitely) many alternative hypotheses.

- The sensory evidence could be the product of:

  * the external world
  * some kind of BIV stimulation
  * some kind of evil demon deceiving me
  * some kind of computer simulation
  * dream (our own or somebody else's)
  * imagination (our own or somebody else's)
  * ...

Ruling out alternatives

- An internalist sceptical argument:

1. Justification is necessary for knowledge.

2. To be justified in believing a proposition one has to have gathered enough evidence to rule out all alternatives.

3. I am currently experiencing an epistemology lecture at the NCH.

4. My experience is not sufficient to rule out the BIV alternative.

∴ I do not know that I'm giving an epistemology lecture at the NCH.

NB: Why internalist? Pay attention to the second premise.

Sceptical scenarios evoke the underdetermination thesis because _____ is insuffient to determine _____.

Chapter III:
Defending Knowledge

An unsubtle externalist reaction

- Someone who is a BIV is indeed in a bad epistemic situation but that doesn't entail that we are in that situation.

- An externalist anti-sceptical argument:

  1. Aside from belief and truth, it is enough to be in a good epistemic situation to have knowledge that *p*.

  2. To be in a good epistemic situation, I don't need to know that I am but rather to have no concrete reason against it.

  3. I have no concrete reason I am not in a good epistemic situation.

  ∴ I know that *p*.

  NB: A lot hangs on premises 2 and 3, which, the sceptics, would find question-begging.

The self-defeating argument

- Suppose someone claims to know the following sceptical hypothesis:

  S: Nothing can be known.

- We can ask the question 'Can proposition *S* be known?'

  Problem: If YES, then it is no longer true that nothing can be known.

  That is, *S* is not true. That means *S* is not known (since knowledge requires the truth of a proposition). Contradiction!

- **Reply**: Sceptics have attempted to circumvent this problem by claiming 'Nothing other than *S* can be known'.

- **Problem**: This seems to be an ad-hoc answer. Why is *S* privileged?

Conditional proofs: A reminder

- You assume something not in your list of premises and then use it together with whatever else you have to prove some conditional.

- Suppose you want to prove A $\rightarrow$ C from {A $\rightarrow$ B, B $\rightarrow$ C}.

1. A $\rightarrow$ B		(premise)
2. B $\rightarrow$ C		(premise)
3.	A	(assumption)
4.	B	1, 3 MP
5.	C	2, 4 MP
6. A $\rightarrow$ C		3-5 **CP**

NB: The output of a CP is always a conditional!

Scepticism and the closure principle

- **Epistemic Closure Principle (ECP)**:

  If S knows that P and S knows that P entails Q, then S knows that Q.

- The closure principle employed in a sceptical argument:

1. ECP holds.		(premise)
2. I don't know I'm not a BIV.		(premise)
3. I know that if I'm in a lecture on Earth, I'm not a BIV.		(premise)
4.	I know I'm in a lecture on Earth.	(assumed)
5.	I know I'm not a BIV.	via 1, 3 & 4
6. If I know I'm in a lecture on Earth, I know I'm not a BIV.		4-5 CP
7. I don't know I'm in a lecture on Earth.		2 & 6 MT

Three general reactions

- One may either:

(a) Accept the conclusion.

(b) Demonstrate that the argument is invalid.

(c) Demonstrate that the argument is not sound.

- These lead to:

(i) Scepticism

(ii) Nowhere (as the argument is valid)

(iii) Which premise?

    - Premise 3 looks untouchable but the other two are not.

    - Premise 1 is denied by Nozick and Dretske.

    - What about premise 2?

Denying premise 1: Nozick

- We already saw how Nozick denies the epistemic closure principle.

- It is also worth noting that his view on scepticism is quite intricate:

  "Our goal is not, however, to refute skepticism, to prove it is wrong or even to argue that it is wrong… Our task here is to explain how knowledge is possible, given what the skeptic says… we need not convince the sceptic… to explain to ourselves how knowledge is possible, not to prove to someone else that knowledge *is* possible" (1981, pp. 197-8) [original emphasis].

Scepticism and logical possibility

- What does it mean to say that it's logically possible to be a BIV?

- It means that the scenario and our experience are consistent.

- But which notion of consistency is at play?

- Suppose we agree on the classical notion of consistency/possibility.

- Various physical impossibilities/improbabilities are logically consistent/possible. Why should the latter have precedence over the former?

Special Topic: Scepticism in Logic

Introduction

- The number of rival logical systems is growing without an end in sight. This has proved to be a mixed blessing.

  Examples: classical, deontic, dialogical, epistemic, free, fuzzy, relevance, etc.

  On the one hand, we have a rich set of formal tools that allows us to model inferences in a variety of ways.

  On the other hand, the existence of rival logical systems threatens to undermine logic's role as a univocal and definitive arbiter of disagreements over the validity of inferences.

Problem

- If, for any given inference, one can always find a logical system that sanctions its validity and there is no way to choose between such systems, then it seems that the aforementioned role no longer befits logic.

Logical realism: Two theses

- The sense that concerns us here is that put forth by Michael Resnik (1999). It is a metaphysical view committed to 2 theses:

"First, there is a fact of the matter of whether something is a logical truth, a logical inconsistency or logically implies something else. (We can put this less contentiously as the thesis that claims about logical truth, etc. are true or false.)"

"Second, that such facts (or the truth-values of such claims) are independent of us, our psychological make-up, our linguistic conventions and inferential practices. In other words, logical realism claims that matters of logic turn upon matters of fact and that these facts are not grounded in us or our practices" (p. 181).

Anti-realism

- A view is anti-realist if it denies the first or second thesis.

  Conventionalists, like A. J. Ayer, deny the second thesis, arguing that the facts that make claims about logical truths, etc., true are purely facts about our linguistic conventions.

  Non-cognitivists, such as Resnik, deny the first thesis – and in so doing obviate the need to answer the second one – arguing that such claims lack truth values.

- Aside from the above, Resnik (1996) identifies 4 more types of anti-realist views:

  proceduralism, relativism, centralism and psychologism.

The anti-realist threat

- The threat from logical anti-realism to the certainty of reasoning and of knowledge is, I hope, evident.

- One need only consider that most of what we typically count as knowledge is the product of inferences.

- If we cannot secure the validity of our inferences, we cannot secure the conclusions we draw from them.

- Hence we cannot secure a vast chunk of what we call knowledge.

The End