

Scepticism – Lecture 3

BERNHARD SALOW (bs416@cam.ac.uk)

Lent Term 2017

Recap

- (1) You don't (can't) know that you're not a handless BIV.
- (2) If you know that you have hands, you (can) know that you're not a handless BIV.

(C) You don't (can't) know that you have hands.

Could reject (2), e.g. by appeal to sensitivity

- 'I have hands' is sensitive: if I didn't have hands, I wouldn't think I did (e.g. because I'd have stumps).
- 'I'm not a BIV' is insensitive: if I was a BIV, I'd still think I'm not.

But various problems, with sensitivity (and other explanations) in particular, with denying (2) more generally.

Robert Nozick (1981) *Philosophical Explanations* ch.3 §1-2

Begging the Question

OK, but *are* our ordinary beliefs sensitive?

Only if the world actually is the way we normally take it to be. And the sceptic is challenging our right to think that. So aren't we begging the question when we assume it is?

Edward Craig (1989) "Nozick and the Sceptic: the Thumbnail Version" *Analysis*

Externalism, Reliabilism, and Scepticism

Externalism: Whether a belief is justified depends on 'external' factors – e.g. the *actual* reliability of the process by which the belief is formed. Whether a belief is knowledge depends on external factors other than truth.

Two senses of 'external': not part of agent's mental state, not always knowable by agent

Simple Reliabilism: a belief is justified/knowledge as long as it is formed by a reliable process.

Alvin Goldman (1979) "What is Justified Belief?"

Reliabilist response to scepticism: perception is reliable. So I do know I have hands.

Moreover, deduction is conditionally reliable. So I also know I'm not a BIV. So could deny (1) instead of (2).

Conditionally reliable: outputs tend to be true given that the inputs are.

Back to Begging the Question

- (4) If perception is reliable, perceptual beliefs (s.a. 'I have hands') are justified/knowledge.
 (5) Perception is reliable.

(C') Perceptual beliefs are justified/knowledge.

Are we entitled to (5)? Yes, if we replace 'is' with 'can be'. So can show that perceptual knowledge is possible!

In other words: challenge whether sceptic is entitled to (1).

Maybe we are entitled to the original (5). Sceptic claims that even if our beliefs are true, they aren't knowledge. So enough to show that if they are true, they are knowledge?

Higher-Order Scepticism

OK, so if perception is reliable, you know you have hands. But even if it is reliable, you don't know that it is. So you don't know *that you know* you have hands.

Response: my belief that perception is reliable was itself formed reliably. So I do know that perception is reliable. The objection works only if we reject reliabilism for 'higher-order' knowledge. But why would we grant it at the first level and not at the second?

Attacking Externalism

Crucial feature of externalist response: refusal to put aside other beliefs about the external world when evaluating a particular one. What is the source of the expectation that we do so?

Possible answer: all justification ultimately depends on claims about the internal world. In other words: externalism is wrong.

Why would that be? Perhaps because we want epistemic norms to be guiding – and for that, it has to be true that we can always tell what they require of us. Rules like 'trust perception when it is reliable' are not like this, since we can't always tell whether perception is reliable.

Externalist response: (a) we often know whether e.g. various process are reliable, so the norms are useful and (b) no norms are such that we can always tell what they require.

Williamson's argument for (b): can't reliably detect changes in the internal world if they are gradual enough.

Alternative diagnosis: expectation is dialectical, not epistemic.

Barry Stroud (2001) "Understanding Human Knowledge in General"

Williamson (2000) *Knowledge and its Limits*. Chs 1, 4, 8, 9