

Part IB, Paper 1, Question 3

'Sceptical scenarios threaten knowledge only in the seminar room.'

The claim that sceptical scenarios, such as the Brain in the Vat as the Evil Demon, threaten knowledge only in the seminar room is characteristic of "common sense" approaches to scepticism. One such approach was Moore's, which may either be taken as holding that certain facts are knowable but not susceptible to proof (in a seminar room as otherwise) or reconstructed to be the claim that the non-sceptic's "common-sense" premises are more probable than those postulated in sceptical scenarios. It will be argued that the latter fails while the former is a fallacious reflection of how humans are constituted. Then, a Wittgensteinian argument will be considered that has limited success against the sceptic, or outside the seminar room.

Let "SK" abbreviate some sceptical scenario, such as the Brain in a Vat, and "q" some statement about the external world. Let the predicate "Kx" mean "I know that x". Sceptical scenarios establish that there is at least a metaphysical possibility that our beliefs about the external world are all false. They factor into the following sceptical argument:

1. $\neg K(\neg SK) \rightarrow \neg Kq$ (p)
2. $\neg K(\neg SK)$ (p)
3. $\therefore \neg Kq$ (1,2)

Moore's response to this argument is to invert it:

1. $Kq \rightarrow K(\neg SK)$ (p)
2. Kq (p)
3. $K(\neg SK)$ (1,2)

Moore gives the conditions for these arguments to be sound:

- a) The premises and conclusions must be different.
- b) The premises must be demonstrated.
- c) The conclusion must follow from the premises

The sceptic denies that (b) holds of Moore's second premise, Kq , on grounds that it has not been demonstrated that some SK renders q false. Moore responds by establishing q with the following argument:

1. Here is a hand (p)
2. Here is another hand (p)
3. At least two objects exist in the external world (1,2)
4. Therefore, the external world exists (3)

The sceptic here denies that the inference of 3 from 1 and 2 is invalid; there is a possible scenario in which 1 and 2 were assertible but 3 false.

One way of reconstructing Moore's argument in the face of the sceptic is to claim that the premises of Moore's argument are much more probable than those the sceptic would need to assume for SK to hold. The sceptic's argument might be said to derive much of its rhetorical strength from its intuitiveness. However, consider the convoluted and unsupported premises required to suppose that such a scenario holds. These make the conclusion that SK holds extremely improbable. By contrast, Moore's premises are intuitive and we believe them to be in line with our experiences.

As such, Moore's conclusion of \neg SK should be adopted, since it is far more likely than SK.

This claim however is false; there are no satisfactory grounds for establishing the probability of Moore's premises. A probability claim could be established by an inductive argument; yet it can be neither a Humean induction nor an inference to the best explanation. It cannot be a Humean induction because regularities in external experiences are equally coherent with the scenario of a capricious (but so far regular) evil demon as with a non-sceptical view of the world. It can be neither form of argument because the claim that causal relations between the external world and our senses provide the best account of our experiences presupposes the existence of the external world, rendering it question-begging. We cannot form an inductive argument for a probability claim about Moore's premises, therefore, because the validity of such arguments is part of what the sceptic doubts.

The failing in the probability version of Moore's argument reveal his weaker hidden axioms: those concerning the causal relation between experience and the external world. Wright restructures Moore's argument:

1. For any proposition P, P is justified by empirical data about the external world.
2. I have a hand
3. Therefore the external world exists.

It becomes clear why Moore fails – he assumes a premise that the sceptic denies; yet Moore cannot disprove SK and so prove that experiences relate to the external world.

Pryor attempts to defend Moore's argument on the grounds that it is epistemically sound because the premises are warranted and that warrant is preserved to the conclusion. A proposition P is warranted, he claims, if it fits with our subjective experience and we have no reason to doubt it. The sceptic's reason to doubt it, he claims, is "illegitimate". Yet he gives no further support for this claim, and so it cannot convince a sceptic. It is, as he himself says, "dialectically redundant".

There is perhaps a sense, however, in which I can know P without being able to prove to my fellow occupants of the seminar room that P. The fact that I have a hand is a "Moorean fact" in the sense that, when directly aware of it, we cannot doubt it (allegedly) but cannot prove it. Moore uses other examples of facts that humans can know but can't prove: chicken-tellers, for example, can tell the sex of chickens without knowing how they know.

The flaw in this analogy is that such instances are human failings. It turns out that chicken-tellers know the sex of the chicken through smell, though they do not realise it. Another species could be imagined whose biological make up was such that they were aware how they know all that they know, and the problem would still hold.

Both Moorean attempts to ground knowledge in "common sense", which is threatened only in the seminar room, fail. However, this idea of facts which can be known but not proven, might lead to a more Wittgensteinian approach to external-world claims. In this, it might be supposed that "there is an external world" is a basic claim which underpins all of our epistemological practices. It cannot be true or false, proven or disproven, it is not rational or irrational. However, doubts about it cannot be sustained: without it, we have no epistemic warrant for beliefs about the external world or doubts about them. Thus to doubt the external world is to take advantage of

an epistemic warrant that is only granted by the basic claim that the external world exists.

In conclusion, the sceptic cannot be defeated on their own terms; terms of metaphysical possibility. Thus, no appeal to “common sense” or “extra-seminar room” suppositions can defeat the possibility of a sceptical scenario holding. However, a developed Wittgenstenian view might lead to the conclusion that all knowledge and doubts ultimately rely on their warrants or the supposition that \neg SK; thus by restricting knowledge, partial success against the sceptic might be achieved, but not on the sceptic’s own terms.

Comments

There are extensive weaknesses in terms of accuracy. For instance, the essay says that Moore is giving conditions for an argument to be ‘sound’, but soundness is not the issue (the issue is non-circularity). Similarly the restructuring of Moore’s argument is wrong: it shows no connection at all between premises, or between them and the conclusion. Similarly the characterization of Pryor’s view is inaccurate in important ways. There is also a serious problem with focus: since the question was about views that only make scepticism threatening in the seminar room, it is unclear why Moore’s argument (which, if it works, make scepticism unthreatening everywhere) is relevant. On the other hand the candidate shows knowledge of the subjects that he/she does discuss and writes about them reasonably well. A weak 2ii.