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Is there any satisfactory alternative to epistemological scepticism?

By Benjamin Roth

Can we know anything? This question has been a perennial theme in the history of Philosophy. Epistemological Scepticism is the pessimistic answer to this question, contending that we cannot justify our claims of knowledge (Watson). But epistemological scepticism is not without stiff competition. Ultimately, we are not compelled to be sceptics.

Most famous of the epistemological sceptics was Descartes, who came to doubt that even a single one of his beliefs was justified or true. He realised that the evidence of his senses was compatible with any number of hypotheses. Of particular concern to Descartes was the possibility that he was being deceived by an evil demon. It was not that he considered this likely, or even plausible. The problem was that he could not rule it out, in which case how could he be sure of anything? (Newman, 2019). Descartes' own (initial) response to the looming scepticism was to embrace it wholeheartedly. Leaving him enveloped in the "unrelenting darkness" (Descartes, 2008, p. 17) of epistemological scepticism.

Furthermore, the unrelenting darkness of scepticism is not necessarily illuminated by ruling out the evil demon hypothesis (or a modern-day equivalent such as depicted in the movie 'The Matrix'). Optimism about the possibility of knowledge would still be threatened by the regress problem (Gaskill, 2005). We tend to feel that justifying a belief requires that a good reason needs to be provided. But that good reason will itself be another belief, requiring a 'good reason' of its own. There is no end to the good reasons that must be provided. According to this line of thought, knowledge seems to require that we come to the end of an infinite series of justifications. Hence there can be no knowledge.

Descartes however was not a sceptic for long. After a few days he arrived at an alternative to scepticism. His doubt was methodological and led him to one thing that could withstand it. Descartes concluded that, even in the case of the evil demon hypothesis, he himself must exist for all of his sceptical woes to have arisen at all. For him to be thinking at all he must exist. There was then one belief that could be used as a solid foundation on which to build an edifice of knowledge. This exemplifies a view on the structure of justification known as Foundationalism (Fumerton, 2016). Foundationalism concludes from the regress argument, not that there can be no knowledge as a sceptic would have it, but that there is a requirement for a foundationalist theory of knowledge. The regress terminates in a basic belief.

Yet the alternative to scepticism that Descartes arrived upon is less than satisfactory. For one thing, it is doubtful how much of an edifice can really be constructed on the foundation of 'cogito ergo sum'. Perhaps he is left with an epistemological sand castle. For another thing, he invoked the existence of God to guarantee he could rely on his mental faculties to arrive at knowledge beyond that of his own existence. Mental faculties should have been rendered doubtful given his commitment to doubt. In other words, he was arguing in a (Cartesian) circle. There is also something unappealing about the certainty invoked since contemporary epistemologists are virtually universally fallibilists (Cohen,

1988). But none of this condemns foundationalism as a whole. There are varieties of foundationalism available that do not rely on theism, and most contemporary versions hold that basic beliefs do not have to be infallible (Ali & Fumerton, 2000).

Foundationalism as a whole, however, is condemned by Agrippa's trilemma (Comesaña & Klein, 2019), a sceptical argument suggesting there can be in principle no satisfactory justification of knowledge. From the Agrippan perspective, the terminating basic beliefs of foundationalism are arbitrary suspensions of the principle of sufficient reason. But at least certain candidates for basicality such as perceptual beliefs do seem categorically different to those that are non-basic. Arguably, the direct connection to perceptual experience is enough to justify them (Rescorla, 2016). So, foundationalism can likely survive the charge of arbitrariness. This may not be enough to declare foundationalism a satisfactory alternative to scepticism, but there are at least some promising foundationalist options on the table.

A second horn of the Agrippan trilemma condemns the infinite regress of justificatory beliefs, the implausibility of which has already been conceded, though the position does have defenders (Klein, 2019). The remaining horn of the trilemma aims to rule out an approach known as coherentism. Coherentism rejects the linear concept of justification assumed by foundationalism as well as the regress argument. According to the coherentist, "a belief is justified to the extent to which the belief set of which it is a member is coherent" (Dancy, 1991, p. 116). In this way justification is a holistic enterprise, thereby avoiding the need for (arguably arbitrary) foundations, and parrying the sceptical infinite regress argument.

Coherentism is often considered to rely on circular reasoning. Agrippa's trilemma rules it out on this basis. Circularity is no more prima facie plausible than infinitism and would indeed rule out coherentism as a satisfactory alternative to scepticism. However, according to Selim Berker (Berker, 2015, p. 19) it would be more accurate to describe the coherentist belief structure as 'entwined' rather than straightforwardly circular. On this view it is the interweaving of *partial* but mutually reinforcing strands of support that underwrites coherentist justification. Alternatively, coherentism may be able to fend off the circularity charge if it is characterised as 'pointing to a condition under which a belief is properly basic' (Plantinga, 1993, p. 78). That is if it coheres appropriately with the rest of a belief set. This interpretation blurs the distinction between foundationalism and coherentism (which some argue is precisely the right course of action (Haack, 1995)). However the circularity charge is responded to, it is notable that Coherentists themselves prefer the metaphor of a web rather than a circle (Berker, 2015), and tend to object to describing their position as endorsing circular reasoning.

Beyond the range of Agrippa's trilemma, there remain alternatives to scepticism that rely on common sense. Bertrand Russell (Beebe, 2009) for example, rejects that the sceptical hypotheses really need to be ruled out at all. The empirical equivalence of a sceptical hypothesis with a realist one does not disqualify us from excluding the sceptical hypothesis on other grounds. That our experiences are caused by real objects in a real external world is a superior hypothesis on account of its explanatory virtues. Descartes could be deceived by an evil demon, but it is simpler to accept the common-sense hypothesis that we have knowledge of an external world. Provided we are fallibilists, the bare

possibility of sceptical hypotheses is not enough to induce scepticism.

With a stronger denial of scepticism, the Moorean response (Willenken, 2011) invokes common sense beliefs such as the belief that we possess hands, to make a sceptical point about the sceptical argument. Whereas Russell argued that we do not need to refute the sceptical scenarios, Moore argued that we can. Without knowing precisely where the sceptical hypothesis errs, we can know there is something wrong, given that we know we have hands. This is an instance of knowledge of an external world object. We should be more confident that we have hands (and therefore there is an external world) than we should be of the premises of the sceptical argument.

This may be satisfactory from the common-sense perspective, but does it stand up to philosophical scrutiny? Many philosophers answer this question in the negative (Willenken, 2010). For example, Moore is criticised for begging the question against the sceptic by assuming his perceptual belief in his hands constitutes knowledge. Alternatively (Riddick, 2021), Moore's ultimate objective was not to directly defeat scepticism, but to "change the terms of the debate". The lesson is that we should not "conflate lack of knowledge of a proposition with the plausibility of its negation", and this is essentially what the sceptical challenge does. In other words, Moore does not need to demonstrate that the proposition "here is a hand" rises to the standard of knowledge. Accordingly, Riddick concludes that Moore's "'proof' does indeed provide a satisfactory response to radical scepticism".

Challenges can be raised against each of the alternatives to scepticism discussed here. But stronger still doubt can be raised against the recommendation of scepticism. As soon as we drop the long considered quixotic demand for Cartesian certainty, the spectre of scepticism is less threatening. Hence, a common theme to the options considered here was the idea that knowledge can be fallible. If we can have knowledge without discounting the bare possibility that we are deceived or in another way mistaken, then we are not compelled to be sceptics. There are some plausible alternatives to scepticism on the table that, even if they cannot be outright endorsed at this early stage of enquiry, still suggest that the job of the epistemological sceptic lies ahead.

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