

Skepticism

LPS 221
Fall 2013 - Winter 2014
(final)

We focus in this seminar on the venerable philosophical problem of radical skepticism about our knowledge of the external world, but the underlying inquiry is also meta-philosophical: how does the problem look, what responses are available, from various different perspectives on what philosophy is and how it should be conducted? The philosophical methods to be considered include naturalism (old and new), ordinary language philosophy, therapeutic philosophy and philosophies of common sense.

The default requirement for those taking the course for a grade (other than S/U) is three short papers (750-1250 words) due at the beginning of class in the 4th week, 7th week, and 10th weeks. Each paper should isolate one localized point in one of the readings and offer some analysis and/or critique. (I'm happy to discuss topics, by e-mail or in person, and/or read a draft ahead of the due date.) Other options are open to negotiation.

I assume everyone has access to copies of

Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia*.

Broughton, *Descartes's Method of Doubt*.

Sosa, *Reflective Knowledge*.

Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*.

The rest of the assigned readings are available on the course EEE web site.

Please come to the first meeting prepared to discuss the reading in Topic 1.

Topics

We begin with the most famous and compelling skeptical argument of all time.

Skeptical arguments I: the dream argument

1. Descartes

Descartes, *Meditations*, first meditation.

Broughton, *Descartes's Method of Doubt*, introduction, chapter 1, pp. 47-54 (the 'strong maxim' is defined on p. 44), 76-77, 82-93.

Extra reading:

Broughton, *Descartes's Method of Doubt*, pp. 196-202.

Broughton, 'Dreamers and madmen'.

In the first of these, Broughton explains what becomes of common sense by the time Descartes reaches the end of the *Meditations*. In the second, she explores why Descartes offers both the lunacy hypothesis (I could be insane) and the dream hypothesis (I could be dreaming).

Hatfield, 'The senses and the fleshless eye'.

'Reason, nature and God in Descartes'.

Our first foray into philosophical methodology introduces my own preferred form of naturalism, a simple perspective that comes up again here and there in what follows.

2. Meta-philosophical focus: second philosophy

Maddy, 'Naturalism: friends and foes', pp. 37-50.

Second Philosophy, §I.1.

'Naturalism, transcendentalism and therapy', pp. 124-125.

Second Philosophy, §§I.7, IV.5.

Extra reading:

Maddy, *Second Philosophy*, §§I.4, I.5, and I.6.

These sections expand on the Second Philosopher's reactions to Kant, Carnap and Quine.

Van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image*, pp. 6-13, 70-83, 92-96.

These are the relevant passages from van Fraassen.

(Notice that if van Fraassen wants to deny that we have evidence for the existence of atoms, he has two options. So far, we've been exploring the first: distinguish the inquiry in which the purported evidence *is* evidence (science) from the inquiry in which it isn't (epistemology). This is the move that leads directly to First Philosophy. The second option is to argue that the purported evidence fails on its own terms, that it doesn't in fact support the existence of atoms. I think the passages we've read so far show van Fraassen taking the first path, but more recently, he's taken the second. Assessing this move requires more attention to the science.

Maddy, *Naturalism in Mathematics*, pp. 131-143.

van Fraassen, 'The perils of Perrin'.

These should give a sense of the disagreement.)

Returning to the dream argument, Broughton remarks that 'Descartes doesn't agree with ... a point I think seems completely uncontroversial to contemporary philosophers. That is the point that ... the outcome of the dream argument would not be just that we do not know what we thought we knew, but rather that we have no more basis for believing what we believe than for believing its negation' (pp. 85-86). She thinks this further step is something 'we don't fully understand' (p. 90). Stroud gives a seminal presentation of that step.

3. The contemporary dream argument

Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*, chapter I.

'Epistemological reflection on knowledge of the external world'.

Extra reading:

Williams, 'Epistemological realism and the basis of skepticism'.

In his article, Stroud is responding to Williams's book *Unnatural Doubts*. This paper is an early, shorter version of Williams's ideas.

Stroud, 'Understanding Human knowledge in general'.

Our next methodological interlude concerns the nowadays much-maligned 'ordinary language philosophy', as represented by J. L. Austin. Others been classified in this 'school', but Austin is the original.

4. Meta-philosophical focus: ordinary language philosophy I

Austin, 'Other minds', pp. 76-103.

'A plea for excuses', pp. 175, 181-189, 201-204.

'Ifs and cans', pp. 231-232.

Urmson, 'Austin's philosophy', pp. 24-26.

Warnock, *J. L. Austin*, chapter 1.

The first reading bears on skepticism; the others are methodological.

Extra reading:

Warnock, 'Saturday mornings'.

5. The contemporary dream argument II

Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*, chapter II.

Stroud takes Austin's challenge to the skeptic quite seriously, and attempts to meet it.

Maddy, *Second Philosophy*, §I.2.

Extra reading:

Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words*, chapters 1 and 2.

In these chapters, Grice introduces the line of thought that Stroud exploits.

Austin's contribution to the skepticism debate continues to interest contemporary philosophers, even if they don't entirely agree on what that contribution was. (Perhaps the most frequent appeal to Austin comes in the writings of the contextualists. See Rysiew's article on 'Epistemic contextualism' in the SEP.)

6. Meta-philosophical focus: ordinary language philosophy II

Kaplan, 'Tales of the unknown: Austin and the argument from ignorance'.

Leite, 'Austin, dreams, and scepticism'.

The next line of skeptical argumentation we consider is the argument from illusion. The argument begins from perceptual relativity or illusion or hallucination, and purports to show that we don't perceive hands and trees and planets, but ideas or impressions or sense data. It's most detailed statement in the modern period is due to the good Bishop Berkeley.

Skeptical arguments II: the argument from illusion

7. Berkeley

Berkeley, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, first dialogue.

Harris, 'Berkeley's argument from perceptual relativity'.

Extra reading:

Rickless, *Berkeley's Argument for Idealism*, pp. 165-181.

Rickless defends the 'negative interpretation', according to which Berkeley intends no positive argument from perceptual relativity to the conclusion that we directly perceive only ideas. (He also makes a noble attempt to validate the so-called 'Identity Argument' -- that intense heat is a pain -- on pp. 148-165). This includes a response to Harris (see p. 170, footnote 35). Of course, whichever line one takes on this aspect of Berkeley interpretation, it's clear that he doesn't regard this as an argument for skepticism!

Hume is another story.

8. Hume

Hume, *Treatise on Human Nature*, introduction and §§IV.2, 4, and 7.

(You needn't expend a lot of effort trying to sort out the argument in §IV.4, ¶¶26-42.)

Maddy, 'Naturalism and common sense', §I.

Extra reading:

Stroud, *Hume*, chapter 1, and pp. 219-224.

Kant was famously aroused from his dogmatic slumber by Hume, but he wasn't the only one. Reid's response takes a naturalistic (as opposed to transcendental) turn.

9. Meta-philosophical focus: Reid's naturalism

Reid, *Inquiry into the Human Mind*, chapter I, §V.7, pp. 70-72, §VI.20, pp. 168-170.

Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man, §II.14, pp. 178-184, §VI.7, pp. 514-9, 525-526.

Maddy, 'Naturalism and common sense', §II.

Extra reading:

Maddy, 'Postscript on Reid'.

Greco, 'Reid's reply to the skeptic'.

Two further papers on Reid, by Alston and van Cleve, come in the extra reading for 'Epistemic circularity', below.

Austin's approach to the argument from illusion takes a different form, illustrating another important philosophical method.

10. Meta-philosophical focus: Austin's therapy I

Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia*, lectures I-V, VII.

Extra reading:

Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia*, the rest.

11. Meta-philosophical focus: Austin's therapy II

Maddy, 'Naturalism, transcendentalism and therapy', §III.

Fischer, *Philosophical Delusion and its Therapy*, §§ 1.1, 1.3, 1.4, and chapter 8.

Extra reading:

Fischer, *Philosophical Delusion and its Therapy*, §§1.2, 5.2, 7.1.

§1.2 goes into more detail on 'non-intentional analogical reasoning'. §5.2 is Fischer's take on Berkeley's argument from perceptual relativity. §7.1 draws an intriguing contrast between philosophy and science.

The third of our skeptical arguments is the most venerable of all, harkening back to the Greeks.

Skeptical arguments III: the infinite regress of justification

12. Sextus

Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, §§i-xvi.

One central question about Pyrrhonian skepticism concerns its scope: the 'rustic' Pyrrhonian suspends judgment on all matters of how things are; the 'urbane' skeptic embraces ordinary beliefs but suspends judgment on philosophical (or even scientific) matters. Fogelin thinks Sextus is urbane; Broughton reads him as rustic.

Fogelin, *Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification*, pp. 3-9.

Perrin, *The Demands of Reason*, pp. 70-72.

Broughton, *Descartes's Method of Doubt*, pp. 37-41.

Extra reading:

Perrin, *The Demands of Reason*, chapter 3.

Our colleague, Casey Perrin, argues in scholarly detail for the rustic interpretation.

The five modes that Sextus attributes to Agrippa have inspired what's now known as 'Agrippa's trilemma' or 'the problem of the infinite regress of justifications'. The two leading schools of response are the foundationalism and the coherentism, but some now defend infinitism.

13. Agrippa's trilemma I (foundationalism and coherentism)

Fogelin, 'Agrippa and the problem of epistemic justification', *Pyrrhonian Reflections*, chapter 6.

Williams, 'Agrippa's trilemma', *The Problem of Knowledge*, chapter 5.

Bonjour, 'The dialectic of foundationalism and coherentism'.

Extra reading:

Greco, 'The argument from an infinite regress of reasons', *Putting Skeptics in their Place*, chapter 5.

Much of the current discussion of coherence is phrased in the language of probability (see Olsson's entry on 'Coherentist theories of epistemic justification' in the SEP).

14. Agrippa's trilemma II (infinetism and defense commitment)

Klein, 'Human knowledge and the infinite regress of reasons'.

Williams, *Problems of Knowledge*, chapter 13.

Austin, *Sense and Sensabilia*, lecture X, especially pp. 110-117.

Though the Second Philosopher doesn't much trade in notions like 'knowledge' and 'justification', she does require that her beliefs be supported by evidence, by good reasons -- and the structure of those evidential relations is subject to pressures similar to those we've been surveying. What happens when she's challenged to defend her belief that there's a hand in front of her when she looks at her hand in ordinary conditions? Does her chain of defenses end at some point; is it infinite?

Extra reading:

Klein, 'Infinetism is the solution to the regress problem'.

Ginet, 'Infinetism is not the solution to the regress problem'.

Klein, 'Reply to Ginet'.

Klein, 'Human knowledge and the infinite progress of reasoning', pp. 3-5.

Ginet, 'Reply to Klein'.

If we understand the coherentist as rejecting one of the premises of Agrippa's trilemma -- the one that takes justification to involve a series of reasons -- in favor of something more holistic, we're still left with the third of his options: justification that runs in a circle. Given that the Second Philosopher will eventually defend the general reliability of her perceptual beliefs on scientific grounds, by appeal to the theory of vision and so on, is there a circle here -- defending perception on the basis of perception -- and if so, is it vicious?

15. Epistemic circularity I

Van Cleve, 'Foundationalism, epistemic principles, and the Cartesian circle', pp. 55-56, 66-91.

Van Cleve's line of thought here represents what's now called 'externalism', though as Kornblith reports (see Extra Reading), the term came into common use only sometime later.

Bonjour, 'Internalism and externalism'.

Bonjour gives an account of the distinction between 'externalism' and 'internalism' as it's now understood.

Extra reading:

Van Cleve, 'Reliability, justification, and induction'.

Van Cleve, 'Reid on the first principles of contingent truths'.

In the first of these papers, van Cleve considers a 'circular' defense of induction. In the second, he gives an insightful analysis of Reid's first principles.

Kornblith, 'A brief historical introduction'.

Greco, 'Justification is not internal'.

Feldman, 'Justification is internal'.

Goldman, 'Internalism exposed'.

16. Epistemic Circularity II

Alston, 'Epistemic circularity'.

Stroud, 'Scepticism, "externalism", and the goal of epistemology'.

Alston also proposes an externalist solution to the problem of circularity. Stroud explains why he takes this sort of move (in Sosa's version, see below) to be inadequate as a response to the skeptic.

Extra reading:

Alston, *The Reliability of Sense Perception*, pp. 15-17, 138-140.

Beyond 'Justification', pp. 201-204.

Alston takes a less generous attitude toward epistemically circular arguments, at least as a matter of emphasis, in these more recent writings. (See also his 'Reid on epistemic principles'.)

Sosa, 'Philosophical skepticism and epistemic circularity'.

Stroud is replying to this paper by Sosa. A revised version appears as 'Philosophical skepticism and externalist epistemology'.

17. Epistemic circularity III

Sosa, 'Human knowledge, animal and reflective', §§I and II.

'Reflective knowledge in the best circles', §§II-VII.

'Easy knowledge and the criterion', §§II-VIII.

Sosa elaborates his position in these papers.

Extra reading:

Vogel, 'Reliabilism leveled'.

Cohen, 'Basic knowledge and the problem of easy knowledge'.

The problem of easy knowledge was first posed in these papers of Vogel and Cohen.

Sosa, 'Epistemic circularity'.

Van Cleve, 'Is knowledge easy or impossible?'.

The final and currently most popular formulation of the skeptical argument involves a so-called closure argument. We approach it via Moore, the famous philosopher of common sense. (Of course Reid was first to command this label, and in fact there's evidence that Moore was influenced by his Scottish precursor.)

Skeptical arguments IV: the closure argument

18. Meta-philosophical focus: common sense

Moore, 'Proof of an external world'.

Weatherall, 'Moore's proof'.

Extra reading:

Moore, 'A defence of common sense'.

Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*, chapter III.

Contemporary philosophers have fixed on a simple conditional they take to derive from Moore (though actual Moore exegesis isn't usually claimed): I have hands, therefore I'm not being deceived by an evil demon. Presumably if I know this implication, and I know I have hands, then I know I'm not being deceived by an evil demon. Employed in a modus ponens, this produces an argument against skepticism -- I

know I have hands, therefore I know I'm not being deceived by an evil demon -- employed in a modus tollens, it's an argument for argument for skepticism -- I can't know there isn't an evil demon, therefore I can't know I have hands. Anyone (like the Second Philosopher) who thinks we have good reason to believe we have hands, but no evidence against the evil demon, will have to interrupt this compelling line of thought.

The 'presumably' in play above rests on a principle called 'closure': if I know p and I know p implies q , then I know q . Some epistemologists deny closure on the basis of their analysis of 'knowledge', most prominently, Dretske (e.g., 'Epistemic operators') and Nozick (e.g., 'Philosophical explanations'). More recently, the problem is often phrased in terms of 'transmission': in the argument from 'I have hands' to 'there is no evil demon', does justification transmit from premise to conclusion?

19. Closure I

Steup, 'Knowledge and skepticism: introduction', pp. 1-4.

Dretske, 'The case against closure', pp. 20-24.

Avner, 'Closure reconsidered', pp. 1-6.

Roush, 'Closure on skepticism'.

Wright, '(Anti-)skeptics simple and subtle'.

Dretske and Avner question the closure principle. Roush retains closure but rejects the underlying ' p implies q '. Wright introduces the idea of transmission failure.

Extra reading:

Hawthorne, 'The case for closure'.

Dretske, 'Reply to Hawthorne'.

Pryor, 'The skeptic and the dogmatist'.

This last is the paper Wright is responding to. Pryor gets his chance next week.

20. Closure II

Pryor, 'What's wrong with Moore's argument'.

Neta, 'Fixing the transmission: the new Mooreans'.

Extra reading:

Tucker, 'When transmission fails'.

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