

## Chapter 10

### Responses to Scepticism

No belief about objects or events independent of one's thought can be well enough evidenced for it to stand as a bit of knowledge. That is what the sceptic about knowledge of the external world asserts. Is the sceptic right? If not, why not? Can we construct a good argument to the conclusion that we *do* know many things? And if scepticism is false, where do the arguments for scepticism that we have encountered go wrong?

The first section of this chapter will be a list of ideas for criticising scepticism or arguing directly that we know something. I will give just a quick hint about each idea, though. I won't propose any full or rigorous argument. Read the first section through carefully, and then choose for further study that one idea you think most promising. Beginning from that idea, construct the best argument against scepticism you can.

In the second section, we will see whether the reliabilist account of epistemic justification has anti-sceptical implications.

#### *1. Against the thesis that no one knows anything about the external world*

a) We can show scepticism to be false just by showing that we do have some knowledge of how things beyond our minds are. And it's not hard to show that we do have some knowledge of things.

For instance, I know right now that there are no live adult elephants in the room with me. Here is how I know this: I know what it would be for there to be a live adult elephant in this room (that is, I can imagine what it would be like to be with an elephant in this room), and, having investigated the room thoroughly in light of this knowledge, I conclude that there are no live adult elephants here. (My experience of this room is nothing like what it would be were there an elephant here with me.) My belief that no live adult elephants are with me in this room is, then, true, and I am perfectly well justified in believing that it is true. Therefore, I know that there are no live adult elephants in this room with me. Since I have at least this one piece of knowledge of the world external to my mind, the sceptical thesis is false.

b) We can show scepticism about knowledge of the external world to be false just by showing that we do have some knowledge of how things beyond our minds are. It is not especially easy to show that we do have some knowledge of things, but it can be done, even in face of the possibility that we are being deceived by an evil scientist.

For instance, even though it is possible (at least in the sense of logically possible) that I am being deceived by an evil scientist into falsely believing that no live adult elephants are with me in this room, still I can know that no live adult elephants are with me in this room. I have plenty of positive evidence that there are no live adult elephants here (see response a) above), but I cannot conclude directly from this evidence that I know that there are no live adult elephants here. I must also show that I am well justified in believing that I am not being deceived by an evil scientist. To do that, I must show that what I take to be positive evidence

that there are no elephants here is *indeed* evidence that there are none, and doesn't merely appear to be evidence.

There are two explanatory hypotheses on the table: 1) what appears to me to be evidence of a lack of elephants actually *is* evidence of a lack of elephants (that is why it appears to be evidence); 2) what appears to me to be evidence of a lack of elephants actually is a careful and elaborate put-up job by an evil scientist. Which hypothesis is best? The second is more complicated than the first and requires answers to a host of questions (how could the scientist do this? *why* is she doing this?). The first, then, has the virtues of simplicity and plausibility. It is, then, the best explanation. Since it is the best explanation, I legitimately infer that it is the true explanation. And so I argue that since I have what appears to me to be compelling evidence that there are no elephants with me now and that what best explains why I have what appears to me to be compelling evidence is that it really is evidence, I know that there are no adult elephants with me now. Since I know that there are no adult elephants with me now, the sceptical thesis that no one knows anything about the external world is false.

c) According to Agrippa's trilemma, when a line of argument meant to show that one is justified in believing some target proposition ends, it ends arbitrarily and, thus, one is not sufficiently justified in believing the target proposition for one's belief to count as knowledge.

But it is false that all end points in lines of reasoning are arbitrary. Sometimes the belief at which the line terminates is directly known to be true. It is known to be true, but not on the basis of evidence. Its truth is, rather, given to us directly in experience. Or it is self-certifying. In any case, it is a belief one is perfectly justified in holding even though one is justified in holding it not in virtue of its relation to other beliefs one has.

d) Scepticism seems to imply that every belief we have about the external world is, for us, merely an hypothesis about how things are. But the idea that every belief about the external world is merely an hypothesis makes no sense. Unless some beliefs are certain, no other beliefs are hypotheses. A belief that is merely an hypothesis is one we can imagine correcting on the basis of evidence. At least some of what we think to be evidence must stand for us as certain, though, if we are to be able to support or correct other beliefs on the basis of evidence. Unless, that is, some of the beliefs by which we check other beliefs have an epistemic status superior to those other beliefs, we would be unable to use them to check those other beliefs.

e) The sceptical thesis seems to imply that we can doubt as true any belief about the external world that we happen to have. So, if scepticism is true, I can doubt that I'm sitting down right now, that I have a body, that the surface of the desk on which my hands are resting is solid, and on and on. But really I am not doubting any of these things. I cannot doubt them; they are fixed in my mind as certainties. When I entertain in mind the sceptical thesis, I am just playing at doubt. Real doubt occurs only when I have a positive reason to think that I am mistaken. To the extent, then, that the thesis that I know nothing of the world external to my mind implies that I can doubt what I cannot doubt, that thesis is one I cannot make sense of. It isn't, then, a thesis at all, but a string of words without meaning.

f) The argument that since it is never all right to be certain of anything, one knows nothing, begs the question. When we ask why we should accept the second premise of that argument, the premise that states that it is never all right to be certain of anything, we are told

that to hold a belief dogmatically is both to set oneself up for embarrassing or belittling experiences and lessons and to have an inflated sense of the firmness of one's epistemic grip on the world. Should we ask why we should accept this statement, though, we would be told that holding a belief dogmatically is imprudent in these ways because one can't know of the belief one holds dogmatically that it is true. (Should one be exposed as wrong, one would be penalized.) But whether we cannot know of a belief that it is true is just what is at issue.

It is perfectly all right to be certain of anything one knows to be true. Since what one knows to be true *is* true, one can never be embarrassed by discovering that it is false. For that reason, taking a dogmatic attitude toward it can never cause one grief.

At most, the argument warns us to be cautious when we claim to know something. We are prudent to claim to know only that which we in fact do know. (To ensure that we don't claim to know what we don't know, we should hold ourselves to very high standards of epistemic justification.)

g) The second premise of the argument from dreams says that one cannot know that right now one is not dreaming. This premise is false. It is false because in order for me to understand the idea that I might right now be dreaming, I have to understand the difference between dreaming about something and thinking about it while awake. But if I understand that difference, then I am reliably able to recognize that I not dreaming when I am not dreaming. And, so, applying my skill to this situation, I notice that I am not dreaming. Thus, I can know that right now I am not dreaming.

h) Some arguments for scepticism depend on a faulty conception of knowledge. Some arguments for scepticism imply that one does not know something so long as one could be wrong about it, "could be wrong about it" understood to mean that it is logically possible that one be wrong (there is no contradiction in thinking that the proposition in question is false). But the concept of knowledge does not carry this implication. So long as one could not in fact be wrong about it, one can know it, even if it is logically possible that one is wrong about it. So, that I know that I am facing a computer screen implies just that I could not in fact be wrong that I am facing a computer screen. It does not imply that the proposition "I am not facing a computer screen" is internally contradictory.

i) Some arguments for scepticism depend on a faulty conception of knowledge. Some arguments for scepticism imply that one does not know that penguins eat fish unless one knows that one knows that penguins eat fish. (This is called the KK principle: to know something is to know that one knows it.) But one can know that penguins eat fish without knowing that one knows that penguins eat fish. To know that penguins eat fish, one must believe truly, and be well justified in believing, that penguins eat fish. That's it. To know that one knows that penguins eat fish, on the other hand, one must have knowledge with regard to each piece of what one takes to be evidence that penguins eat fish. Just so long as each piece of evidence one has that penguins eat fish is evidence that they do, one can know that penguins eat fish. One needn't also know that each piece of evidence is a piece of evidence.

j) Some arguments for scepticism depend on a faulty conception of knowledge. Some presuppose that to know something is to be certain that it is true. But this is false. One can know something without being or feeling certain that it is true. (Perhaps to know with certainty is to know that one knows. Certainty comes with knowing that one's justification for one's belief is strong enough for one's belief to count as knowledge. Since we can know

something without knowing that we know it, we can know something without being certain about it, if to be certain is to know that one knows.)

## *2. Reliabilism and scepticism*

To know something is to be well justified epistemically in believing something that is true. For the most part so far in our discussion of scepticism, we have understood what it is to be well justified epistemically in believing something according to what we called, in Chapter 2, the standard account of epistemic justification. That account is as follows: If person is justified epistemically in believing that *p*, then that person is aware of a good argument that has “*p*” as its conclusion, and is unaware of any good argument that has “not-*p*” as its conclusion. (She is aware of her reasons for believing that *p* and aware that she has no reason not to believe that *p*.) On the standard account, epistemic justification is always inferential. One is justified in believing that *p*, that is, to the extent that the proposition “*p*” is well connected inferentially to other propositions one believes.

One of the responses to scepticism in Section 1 of this chapter is directly at odds with the standard account of epistemic justification. Response c) says that there are some matters about which we have knowledge though our belief is not supported inferentially by any other belief. Some beliefs about some matters, according to that response, are epistemically basic. We are justified in holding an epistemically basic belief just in virtue of something concerning the belief itself (in virtue of what makes it basic), not in virtue of how it stands in relation to other of our beliefs. Perhaps one or two of the other responses also challenges some element in the standard account of epistemic justification.

The standard account of the nature of epistemic justification is not the only account we have encountered. We looked briefly, again in Chapter 2, at the reliabilist account. Let us now see what implications the reliabilist account has for the idea that no one knows anything about objects or events external to her mind.

The reliabilist account of epistemic justification takes epistemic justification to be a matter of how one acquired a belief. If one acquired the belief that *p* through a mechanism or process that standardly brings one only true beliefs, then one is epistemically justified in believing that *p*. The idea is that when one acquires a belief through a reliable mechanism or process, one wouldn't have acquired that belief had it been false. When one acquires a belief through a reliable mechanism or process, one wouldn't have come to believe that the world is the way one believes it is were it not that way.

Perhaps visual inspection is a reliable belief forming process, at least under certain lighting conditions and when directed toward certain kinds of object or event. Sally, let us suppose, is well justified in believing that Martin is approaching her for she acquired this belief through visual inspection of her surroundings. That visual inspection is reliable in her circumstances means that most likely she would not have come to believe that Martin is approaching her had Martin not been approaching her.

On the reliabilist account, one is not justified in holding a particular belief should either of two things be the case. One is not justified in holding a belief when it was not acquired via a reliable belief forming mechanism or process. Suppose that beliefs acquired wishfully are often enough not true (maybe they are false 10% of the time, say). If beliefs acquired wishfully are often enough not true, then if Sally's desire that Martin approach her played a

role in her coming to believe that Martin is approaching her, then Sally is not justified in believing that Martin is approaching her. As well, one is not justified in holding a belief though it was acquired by a reliable belief forming process when one acquired in it circumstances abnormal for that process. If Sally acquired the belief that Martin is approaching through visual inspection but in a dark room, then Sally is not justified in believing that Martin is approaching. Further, if Sally acquired the belief that Martin is approaching through visual inspection under ideal circumstances, but it happens that Martin's identical twin Albert is in the vicinity, then again Sally is not justified in believing that Martin is approaching her. (Sally is not justified in believing that Martin is approaching her in either of the situations even if Martin is approaching her. Her belief is true in those cases, but she would have believed Martin is approaching her even had it been Albert who approached her.)

There is nothing in this account of what it is to be justified epistemically in holding a proposition true about being aware of reasons or arguments. Indeed, there is nothing in it about reasons or arguments at all. Whether one is well justified is simply a matter of the facts regarding how one acquired one's belief and the facts about one's environment.

Suppose that Sally comes via a belief-forming process reliable in Sally's circumstances to acquire the true belief that Roger is approaching her. Suppose also that Albert, Roger's identical twin, is thousands of miles away. Sally acquired the belief that Roger is approaching her because Roger is approaching her and nothing else in her environment could also have caused her to acquire the belief that Roger is approaching her. Sally is aware of none of these things. She has no beliefs about the process by which she acquired her belief and she has no idea where Albert is (she doesn't know that Albert exists). She just finds herself thinking that Roger is approaching her.

According to the reliabilist account of epistemic justification, Sally is very well justified in believing that Roger is approaching her. Since Sally is well justified in believing and her belief is true, and since we have no reason not to say that Sally knows that Roger is approaching her, we must accept that Sally knows that Roger is approaching her. Scepticism is false, then, or at least it is false that a person can never be well enough justified epistemically in believing something for his or her belief to count as knowledge. Reliabilism blocks at least one route to scepticism and, perhaps, even establishes that knowledge is possible.

*Does reliabilism block scepticism about knowledge of the external world?* The reliabilist says that we have knowledge about this and that as we wouldn't have acquired our beliefs about this and that except that they are true and because they are true. Now say Sally believes twenty things, 18 of which are true, and ten of which count as knowledge on the reliabilist account. Sally knows ten things—but she does not know of any of the ten things she knows that she knows it. Sally has no idea which of the twenty things she believes are things she knows. Of each of the twenty things she believes, she is aware only that she believes it.

According to reliabilism, we do know things, though we're not in a position to say of anything we believe that we know it. We cannot, that is, distinguish between what we know and what we merely believe. This sure sounds a lot like scepticism! The spirit of scepticism, at least, remains alive in reliabilism, even if the letter needs revising.

A sceptic, one who thinks that no one really knows anything about the external world, can accept the reliabilist account of epistemic justification without abandoning her scepticism.

Reliabilism says that for any belief “p,” we don’t know whether that belief is a piece of knowledge, even if it is a piece of knowledge. (We don’t know whether we know that p, even if we do know that p. Or we don’t know whether we know that we know that p, even if we do know that we know that p.) Scepticism is comforted, not refuted, the sceptic can say, by the idea that though we do know things we don’t know just what it is that we know.