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A defense of Academic skepticism

Markus Lammenranta

I will defend a form of Academic skepticism that denies the possibility of knowledge about the external world. The standard argument for it relies on internalism and infallibilism, doctrines that were widely accepted in the history of epistemology until the late 20th century. Contemporary epistemologists typically deny at least one of them, because together they lead to skepticism. Skepticism is thought to be bad because it conflicts with common sense, our ordinary epistemic practices, and linguistic data. I will argue that this is not so, that Academic skepticism gives in fact a better explanation of our intuitions and linguistic data than dogmatic epistemology. Finally, following the steps of Arcesilaus, Carneades and Hume, I will show how Academic skepticism can give a good response to the Stoics' Apraxia objection that skepticism makes rational action and good life impossible. On the contrary, it is skepticism that makes a good and flourishing life possible.

The skeptical argument

Arguments for Academic skepticism raise possibilities of error. Skeptical hypotheses describe such possibilities. A famous example is the contemporary version of Descartes' evil demon hypothesis:

> *The brain-in-a-vat hypothesis*: I am a brain in a vat wired to a computer that stimulates it so that I have the experiences and beliefs I have now, but these beliefs are false.

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We can use the hypothesis to distinguish between two cases: in one of them the hypothesis is false and in the other it is true.

> *The good case*: Things are the way I think they are. I have hands, and it does not just appear that I have hands.
>
> *The bad case*: I am a handless brain in a vat, and it merely appears to me that I have hands.

Though I believe that I am in the good case, I cannot rule out the possibility that I am in the bad case. Because my experiences are the same in both cases, everything appears exactly the same. So, we get the following argument:

> P1 If I know that I have hands, my evidence rules out the possibility that I am a handless brain.
>
> P2 My evidence does not rule out the possibility that I am a handless brain.
>
> C Therefore, I do not know that I have hands.

The argument is valid, and the premises are plausible. Their plausibility is explained by three doctrines that are independently plausible:

> *Evidentialism*: S knows that p only if S's evidence supports p.
>
> *Infallibilism*: S knows that p only if S's evidence guarantees the truth of p (S's evidence rules out all alternatives to p, that is, the possibilities in which not-p). In short, knowledge requires conclusive evidence.
>
> *Internalism*: S has the same evidence in the good case and in the bad case.

Infallibilism explains why P1 is true, and internalism explains why P2 is true.

All these doctrines are intuitive, and this is widely conceded by philosophers. The problem is that together they lead to skepticism, which they find impossible to accept. I will try to show that skepticism is not so hard to accept. It may be the best way to save our overall intuitions. Indeed, some of the greatest modern philosophers have been Academic skeptics, such as John Locke, David Hume and Bertrand Russell.

Because it is infallibilism that is most often rejected by contemporary philosophers,[1] I'd like to say something about its intuitiveness and the costs of rejecting it.

[1] Evidential internalists reject just infallibilism. Evidential externalists, like Williamson, reject just internalism. Reliabilists reject all three doctrines. I will not discuss these alternatives to Academic skepticism in detail. If my case for skepticism is successful, we will lose motivation for them.

The madness of fallibilism

David Lewis calls fallibilism mad and defends the intuitiveness of infallibilism in "Elusive Knowledge" (1996, 249):

> It seems as if knowledge must be by definition infallible. If you claim that S knows that P, and yet you grant that S cannot eliminate a certain possibility in which not-P, it seems as if you have granted that S does not after all know that P. To speak of fallible knowledge, or knowledge despite uneliminated possibilities of error, just sounds contradictory.

Let me remind you of some problems of fallibilism. Firstly, knowledge attributions that concede the possibility of error are odd. Lewis refers to such attributions. For example, you will find it odd if I say that I know that it is Monday, but I may be wrong, or that I know that the animal in the cage is a zebra, but it may be a painted mule. However, there should be nothing odd with these claims if fallibilism were true.

Secondly, fallibilism creates Gettier problems: These are counterexamples to the analysis of knowledge as a true and justified belief. If a justified belief can be false, as fallibilism says, it is possible to imagine cases of justified beliefs that are true by luck. Intuitively, such beliefs are not knowledge.

Thirdly, the Lottery problem supports infallibilism. Assume that I have a lottery ticket. We have the intuition that I cannot know that my lottery ticket will lose (though this is very probable). So, any probability less than one seems to be insufficient for knowledge.

Fourthly, if fallibilism were able to solve the Lottery problem, it would still have the Threshold problem: If knowledge does not require conclusive evidence, then how strong must the evidence be on the scale from 0 to 1? Any threshold less than 1 seems arbitrary.

Of course, fallibilists have tried to offer various solutions, but the point is that fallibilism has a lot of problems that infallibilism easily avoids.

Skepticism, common sense, and ordinary language

Though there are plausible arguments for skepticism, philosophers typically think that there must be something wrong with their premises. That a view leads to skepticism is taken to be a *reductio ad absurdum* of it. Why?

One reason is that many philosophers follow G. E. Moore (1959), who thought that if philosophy is in conflict with common sense, common sense wins. It is a part of common sense that we know a lot. So, if skepticism denies this, it is wrong.

The skeptic naturally rejects this common-sense view, but the price may not be high. First, the view that philosophy cannot revise common sense is overly pessimistic

about what philosophy can do. Second, the skeptic can explain why people believe that they know a lot even though it is not strictly speaking true.

Another objection to skepticism appeals to our ordinary use of language. John L. Austin (1979) thinks that the fact that we attribute knowledge to subjects who don't satisfy the skeptical standards shows that these standards are too stringent. Our ordinary standards are less demanding. We do not normally require of a person who claims to know something to be able to rule out the possibility that she is asleep or that she is just a brain in a vat. According to Austin, our ordinary use of "know" supports rather the *relevant alternatives theory of knowledge*:

> S knows that p only if S's evidence rules out all relevant alternatives to p.

According to this account, I can know that I have hands even though my evidence does not rule out the possibility that I am a handless brain, because this possibility is not a relevant alternative (See also Stroud 1984, 39–82).

To respond to Austin and Moore, we need to make the following distinction:

1. What is true to say?
2. What is appropriate or reasonable to say?

As skeptics, we can agree with Austin that it is appropriate to say that someone knows a lot though she cannot rule out the skeptical alternatives, but insist that it is not strictly speaking true to say so.

Peter Unger (1971) defends this sort of response by arguing that "know" is an absolute term, like "flat" and "empty". For example, if a plane is flat, it is absolutely flat. There is nothing that is flatter. Flatness rules out all bumps and curves. Similarly, if you know that p, no one else knows it better or to a higher degree. There are no degrees of knowledge. Knowledge rules out all possibilities of error.

It follows from such absoluteness that no plane is really flat, because there are always some microscopic bumps on it. In the same way, no one knows anything about the external world, because there are always some uneliminated possibilities of error.

Yet, according to Unger, it may be appropriate to say that the floor is flat because it is for practical purposes close enough to absolute flatness. Some small bumps do not matter if we want to dance on it. Similarly, it may be appropriate to say that you know that you have hands, because you are close enough to knowing this for practical purposes. It does not matter that you cannot rule out the handless-brain possibility.

The point is that when we use the term "know" in ordinary contexts, we speak loosely. Strictly speaking we don't know anything about the external world, but loosely speaking we know many things. The skeptic points out that the strict use of "know" explains the plausibility of skeptical arguments, and the loose use explains our ordinary epistemic practices and the common-sense intuitions (Davis 2007).

There are two popular dogmatic or non-skeptical theories that try to do the same. Contextualism (Cohen 1988; DeRose 1995; Lewis 1996) and subject-sensitive invariantism (Hawthorne 2004; Stanley 2005) concede that when I consider skeptical arguments and conclude "I don't know anything about the external world", what I say is true, but when I in some ordinary context say "I know that the sun is shining" what I say is true as well. This is possible because there is a shift in epistemic standards between the skeptical context and the ordinary context: I can meet the low standards of the ordinary context without meeting the high standards of the skeptical context. These views try to do justice both to our skeptical intuitions and common-sense intuitions. They differ from skepticism in taking our ordinary knowledge attributions to be true, whereas skepticism takes them to be appropriate but false. According to skepticism, our epistemic standards are invariant and high in all contexts.

You may think that it is an advantage of contextualism and subject-sensitive invariantism that they make our ordinary knowledge attributions true. However, linguistic evidence seems to support skeptical invariantism:

Let's imagine the following dialogue between A and B:

> A: Do you know what that is?
> B: Yes, I do. It is a zebra.
> A: But can you rule out that it is a cleverly painted mule?
> B: No, I can't.
> A: So, you admit you didn't know it was a zebra?
> B: Yes, I do. I didn't know that.

B's concession that she didn't know is quite natural, and skeptical invariantism explains this: it is true. B takes back her original knowledge claim. She admits that she spoke loosely. She did not really know.

Subject-sensitive invariantism does not predict this answer. According to it, B should say something like this:

> B: No, I don't. I did know then that it was a zebra. But after you mentioned the painted-mule possibility, I no longer know.

This answer is odd. Yet it is true according subject-sensitive invariantism, because mentioning the painted-mule possibility raises the standards of knowledge. B does not meet the new high standards, though she met the original low standards. According to this view, knowledge is elusive. It disappears when error possibilities are mentioned, which is strange (DeRose 2009, 194–96).

Contextualism does not have this problem, because high standards do not affect knowledge itself. They determine the content of knowledge attributions. So, when B originally said "I know it is a zebra", what she said was true. B fulfills the low standards of that context. When she in a new context says, "I did not know it was a zebra", she

also speaks truly. Her earlier belief does not satisfy the higher standards of this new context of utterance.

So far so good, but when we change A's last question, we get a very odd result:

> A: So, you admit that what you earlier said was not true.
> B: No, I don't admit anything like that.

It follows from contextualism that what B said in the earlier low-standard context was true. So, according to contextualism, what B says here should be quite appropriate, though it is not (MacFarlane 2005, 202–203).

This linguistic evidence suggests that the salience of error-possibilities affects neither the conditions of knowledge nor the content of "know". What it does is to make us reconsider and take back our knowledge claims. So, the linguistic evidence supports skeptical invariantism.

The Apraxia objection

The core of the Apraxia objection is that the skeptic is not able to act rationally if she has no beliefs. Rational action is not possible without beliefs. The Stoics made this objection against the Academic skeptics, such as Arcesilaus and Carneades (Vogt 2010; Perin 2010, 86–113). The objection is relevant because the skeptics were thought to be committed to the Stoic doctrine that a wise person believes something only if she knows it. So, if the skeptics deny knowledge, they should also deny beliefs.

The Stoics thought that a wise person assents only to cognitive impressions that are always true. Assuming that assenting to an impression is to believe its content, we get the view that a wise person's beliefs are based on cognitive impressions that guarantee their truth. And assuming that beliefs based on cognitive impressions constitute knowledge, a wise person has no mere beliefs, just knowledge. The skeptics pointed out that there are no cognitive impressions, because for any true impression there can be a false one that is exactly similar. So, a wise person has no knowledge and should not have any beliefs (Frede 1987; Reed 2002).

If we talk about justification instead of a wise person, it seems that the Stoics are committed to an infallibilist account of justification.

> *Infallible justification*: S is justified in believing that p if and only if S has conclusive evidence for p.

The skeptics argue that because conclusive evidence consists of cognitive impressions and there are no cognitive impressions, we are not justified in believing anything and should suspend belief. We get the same result by considering the skeptical hypotheses of the *First Meditation*. They show that we don't have conclusive evidence for beliefs about the external world.

Then the Stoics made the Apraxia objection, and the skeptics responded that we can act rationally without beliefs. We can guide our actions by following our impressions. Let me make a suggestion that is similar in spirit.

The principle of infallible justification concerns full belief. To fully believe that p one must be maximally convinced or certain of p. One must have no doubts about p. Understood in this way the principle is quite plausible: One should be certain of p only if one has conclusive evidence for p, evidence that rules out all possibilities of error. If there are any uneliminated possibilities of error, one should not be completely certain of p.

How do we then conduct our lives? Arcesilaus and Carneades say that we follow our impressions. Rational action is possible on the basis of rational or convincing impressions. We can understand impressions as propositional attitudes that contemporary philosophers call *seemings*. For example, in sense experience things seem to be in a certain way. However, because seemings can be initially in conflict, we can also speak about resultant seemings – how things seem after assessing the weight of the initial seemings. The resultant seeming is a matter of how things seem all things considered. According to Sosa (2015, 231–232), we can understand resultant seemings as credences, degrees of confidence or belief.

The response to the Apraxia objection is thus that action is possible on the basis of degrees of belief and that rational action is possible on the basis of rational or justified degrees of belief. Action does not require full belief.

What justifies degrees of belief? The popular answer in modern philosophy is evidence. The degree of belief should reflect the strength of the evidence:

> "Wise man... proportions his belief to the evidence." (Hume 1975, 110)

> "Perfect rationality consists... in attaching to every proposition a degree of belief corresponding to its degree of credibility." (Russell 1948, 397)

> *Bayesian evidentialism*: In order to be epistemically justified in her degree of belief that p, an agent's degree of belief that p must conform to her evidence for and against p.

So, one possible Academic response to the Apraxia objection is to suggest that rational action and thought are based on justified credences or degrees of belief. However, there is a worry that this view makes both theoretical and practical reasoning too complicated. We may not have cognitive resources for this sort of reasoning.

If you share this worry, the skeptic can give another response to the Apraxia objection. It is to suggest that there are outright beliefs (all or nothing beliefs) that do not require maximal confidence or certainty. They just require sufficient confidence, confidence that is above a certain threshold. We get the following theory of justification for such out-right beliefs:

> *The Lockean thesis*: S is justified in believing that *p* if and only if S is justified in having a degree of confidence in *p* that is sufficient for belief (above the belief threshold).

The central question of this view is how to determine the threshold in a non-arbitrary way (the Threshold problem). One option is to think that the only non-arbitrary threshold is maximal confidence or subjective probability 1. The problem is that we have very few such beliefs.

The other option is to think that the threshold varies with the context.

> "Intuitively, one believes p outright when one is willing to use p as a premise in practical reasoning." (Williamson 2000, 99)

It is plausible that whether one is willing to rely on p in action depends on practical considerations that vary with the context. If the costs of being wrong about p are very high, one may not be willing to act on p. If they are low, one may be willing to act. So, if Williamson is right, outright belief depends on the practical stakes. We can call this view doxastic pragmatism.

To sum up, knowledge is strong, belief is weak. Knowledge requires the highest degree of belief and justification. But because our beliefs and justifications are weak, we never or rarely attain knowledge. Though we aim at knowledge, we are quite happy to come close to it. For practical purposes, this is enough: Rational action does not require knowledge.[2] It just requires justified degrees of belief or weak beliefs.

Skepticism as a way of life

Another version of the Apraxia objection was that the skeptic cannot live a good life (Vogt 2010, 166). One common idea in ancient philosophy after Socrates was that philosophy should be a guide to good life. The Stoics followed Socrates in thinking that it is knowledge that guarantees such a life. The Pyrrhonists reported that suspension of belief is the way to a happy life. The Academic skeptics Arcesilaus and Carneades were silent about this, but there was a modern skeptic who defended the practical value of Academic skepticism compared to Pyrrhonism and dogmatism.

That skeptic was David Hume who, in the final section of *Inquiry*, says that the life of a Pyrrhonist would be miserable and short, because without beliefs she is not able to act and to satisfy her basic needs. But also, dogmatism has its dangers:

> The greater part of mankind are naturally apt to be affirmative and dogmatical in their opinions; and while they see objects only on one side,

[2] In contemporary philosophy, Hawthorne and Stanley (2008) defend the Stoic view that knowledge is necessary (and sufficient) for rational action. Brown (2008) and Comesaña & McGrath (2014) criticize it.

> and have no idea of any counterpoising argument, they throw themselves precipitately into the principles, to which they are inclined; nor have they any indulgence for those who entertain opposite sentiments. To hesitate or balance perplexes their understanding, checks their passion, and suspends their action. (Hume 1975, 161)

Hume thinks that what he calls academical or mitigated skepticism avoids the dangers of both Pyrrhonism and dogmatism. I think this is also true of the kind of Academic skepticism that I have defended (See also Hazlett 2014, 181-184).

Let's understand dogmatism in a way Sextus (2000, 3) does. The dogmatists are people who believe that they know the truth and have therefore no need to continue inquiry. It seems that one who believes that she knows that p is inclined to reason in the ways Hume suggests:

1. I know that p. If I know that p, I know that all evidence against p is misleading. So, I know that all evidence against p is misleading. So, I should pay no attention to the evidence against p.
2. I know that p. If I know that p, I know that anybody who disagrees with me about p is wrong. So, I know that anybody who disagrees with me about p is wrong. So, I should pay no attention to those who disagree with me about p.
3. I know that p. If I know that p, I may use p as a reason for action. So, I may use p as a reason for action.

All these ways of reasoning are based on plausible principles. So, Hume appears to be right about the dangers of dogmatism: Dogmatists ignore evidence and arguments against their view, do not tolerate those who have opposite views, and are inclined to act rashly. It is improbable that these inclinations would lead to a good life.

An Academic skeptic avoids both the dangers of Pyrrhonism and dogmatism. First, she has rational beliefs and is able to act rationally. Second, she does not believe that she knows that p. So, she has not terminated the inquiry about p and is sensitive to further evidence both for and against p, including evidence provided by other people. And, finally, she considers carefully whether her evidence for p is sufficient for action in the context she is.

So, Academic skepticism seems to offer a better life than Pyrrhonism and dogmatism. A further benefit is that it encourages us to cultivate intellectual virtues, such as conscientiousness, humility and open-mindedness, which are constitutive of an intellectually good and flourishing life. To sum up, there are both epistemic and practical reasons to be an Academic skeptic.

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