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Mind and Nature

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**Silly Skeptic, You’re Just Plain Irrational!**

When it comes down to epistemology, the image that springs most readily to mind for most people is a not a group of men in tweed suits pondering the darkest secrets of knowledge and truth, but rather an image of Keanu Reeves waking up in a vat of pink goo. I’m talking, of course, about *The Matrix*, a film concerned with a man who has found out that he had spent his entire life in a vat deceived into thinking that he was living a normal life by a race of hyperintelligent machines bent on using the human race as a power source. Instead of answering the question “Dude…but…what if, like, we’re just brains in vats or something?” with an incredulous look and a “My dear sir, we’re not,” an inordinate amount of serious academic time and effort is devoted to the question of whether or not we just might be. This seems more than a little ridiculous. After all, we can point to things that exist and assert their existence and state that that existence proves that we are not brains in vats. Or can we? The skeptical hypothesis (SA) proves to be more difficult than that to defeat, for at every turn we find ourselves confronted with having to prove each successive assertion of knowledge to the skeptic’s satisfaction, and that simply cannot be done.

It is tempting in the face of the recurrent objections of the skeptic to simply decide that he cannot be defeated and that SA will always exist as an omnipresent objection to statements about epistemic knowledge. Dr. Nick Bostrom has not succumbed to the temptation. In his paper “What we should say to the Skeptic,” Bostrom argues that the skeptic can in fact be defeated on the basis that he is an irrational being by definition and that as such, refute his arguments as irrational. The basic argument *modus ponens* runs as follows:

I) If the skeptic is irrational, then skepticism is refuted.

II) The skeptic is irrational.

III) Therefore, skepticism is refuted.

In parts I-II of this paper I will examine the premises of this argument in turn, in part III, I will evaluate the argument’s soundness, and in part III I will make a few remarks about the implications of Bostrom’s view when applied to general epistemology, rather than merely to the purpose of defeating the skeptic.

**I. *“If the skeptic is irrational, then skepticism is refuted.”***

The question here is whether or not this is so, that is to say, whether or not the skeptic’s rationality has anything to do with the validity of SA. It would appear to be the case that this is so. In fact, upon close inspection, it seems entirely impossible to assert anything other than this: that there do not exist any cases where an irrational person might advance an argument which is valid. Rationality is a measure of whether or not a person is one who “typically expects that nature is as regular as is compatible with his prior experiences,” (Bostrom). Persons endowed with rationality are for all intents and purposes persons whose responses to stimuli could be understood by an uninterested observer who was party to their mental state data through a mind meld a la *Star Trek* (or some other form of direct mental communication).

Is it the case that arguments advanced by irrational beings are automatically invalidated by virtue of the fact that their presenter is irrational. A person without rationality could not ever advance an argument that would follow on any understandable or justifiable set of premises. Even if, for example, such a person were to advance an argument that had been shown to be true by a person with rationality independently of contact with that person by sheer luck (think as a product of infinite quantum iteration), *their* argument would be invalid because its premises are not constructed upon rational thought and as such cannot be true. The words of the argument might be the same, but they would not stand in for the same general course of thought which they would if the argument was advanced by a rational person. As such, I argue that it is indeed so that should it be proved that the skeptic lacks rationality, then all arguments advanced by the skeptic are also invalid.

**II. *“The skeptic is irrational.”***

In light of the conclusion I reached in I., the question of whether or not the skeptic is rational is now of paramount importance. Bostrom argues that by definition the skeptic is not rational because he does not and what is more *cannot* believe in the principle of induction (that conclusions may follow from premises based upon evidence). If the skeptic was rational, he would have to believe in the principle of induction, as such belief is a natural and inescapable part of being rational. As Bostrom puts it, irrational people live generally unsatisfactory lives as a result of their irrationality, faced with this new information, the skeptic “should be rational because it is rational to believe that being rational will be good for [him],” (Bostrom) in the future, but since he holds SA, he cannot be convinced that he should do something based on good reasons for doing so. From this, it becomes clear that since he cannot be convinced that being rational is rational, there is no way to convince him that he is wrong, which means that he is irrational. Bostrom puts it thus: “The skeptic is irrational because he don't [sic, recte doesn’t] believe in the principle of induction, and part of what is meant by "being rational" is believing [sic, recte belief] in that principle,” (Bostrom). As far as I am concerned, based upon the above arguments, SA has been refuted.

**III. *“ how my theory can be incorporated into a broader epistemology”***

Bostrom’s defeat of SA holds further ramifications for the field of epistemology over and above demonstrating that one of the most consistently frustrating objections to just about every argument ever posed is invalid. I will briefly address two of those below.

* **What is this Thing Called Knowledge?**

In response to the skeptic’s query of “How could we ever know that we were rational?” Bostrom argues that we could in fact know many things, because knowing does not necessarily imply total certainty with regards to truth. SA is not so much an argument about knowledge as it is an argument about semantics that can be easily handled. According to Bostrom, S knows that p iff:

I) S is convinced that p.

II) S is justified in believing that the probability that p is very high.

III) p.

IV) S's justification for believing p is of the right sort.

This theory of knowledge incorporates recent objections such as those raised by Gettier in that it does not call upon the definition of knowledge as justified true belief but rather upon properly justified true belief, which allows that the believer would not have believed the same way were they party to all of the facts in the case, i.e. if I look at a stopped clock to determine the time and the time I got from the clock was the correct time by sheer epistemic luck, I do not actually know the time because if I had known that the clock was stopped I wouldn’t have believed that the time I read was the right one. Bostrom’s purpose for elaborating on this topic is to show the skeptic that it is possible to know that one is rational; namely that it is possible to know that we are rational because all conditions Bostrom outlines for knowledge are fulfilled for p=“I am rational.”

Applying Bostrom’s conception of knowledge to topics other than rationality yields interesting results, such as the apparent ease with which we might know things that could turn out to be wrong, i.e. knowing the sun will rise tomorrow even though it might not, which is generally a key turning point in arguments about the nature of knowledge, including SA. “Knowing, in this sense, does not imply (absolute) certainty. Maybe the sun won't rise tomorrow, and in that case I will be wrong now if I say that I know that the sun will rise tomorrow. But if the sun indeed rises, then I will presumably be right now to claim that I know that the sun will rise tomorrow,” (Bostrom). Bostrom suggests that such knowledge is “ordinary knowledge,” whereas “sophisticated knowledge” is knowledge that only qualifies as knowledge when it is true. We can have ordinary knowledge about a great many things, and it sufficient for most purposes (i.e. claims about propositions occurring), but we can only claim sophisticated knowledge in cases where we can demonstrate a 100% chance of a proposition occurring.

* ***A Priori* Reasoning**

Bostrom argues that empirical knowledge can be developed from *a priori* reasoning insofar as *a priori* reasoning allows us to turn “implicit knowledge” into “explicit knowledge.” Implicit knowledge encompasses all of the building blocks required to understand/form a given conclusion and explicit knowledge is knowledge that a person can express in sentences without having to think about it for a long time. For example, I can have implicit knowledge about “numbers,” “\*” and “=,” but that does not mean that I automatically know that 5763\*389=2241807 is true. However, based on my implicit knowledge and given enough time for “a sustained effort of a priori reasoning (where [sic, recte were] it not for limitations in our working memory etc.),” (Bostrom), I can develop explicit knowledge that 5763\*389=2241807 is true. Essentially Bostrom suggests that a mind is a set of prepositions quantified with values representing the confidence of the mind in maintaining that preposition; through the application of knowledge and logical reasoning, the person can make a confidence value go up or down in order to make it compatible with the confidence numbers of the other prepositions in his mind. While it is not possible to develop sophisticated explicit knowledge about everything, it is possible to have sophisticated knowledge of the probability of a given proposition obtaining, which is sufficient in cases where the skeptic demands that sophisticated knowledge is the base requirement for knowledge and that sophisticated knowledge is impossible due to the infinitely recursive chain of knowing. In such cases we can coherently say that we know that we aren’t a brain in a vat but that we might be a brain in a vat and that the probability that we aren’t is very high.

**IV. Conclusion**

I have done my best to present, explain, and provide an analysis of Bostrom’s antiskeptical argument in the preceding pages. It is clear to me that the theories advanced by Bostrom shall, if subjected to further rational inquiry, lead to progress in the field of epistemology. In one brief and masterful stroke he has obliterated the skeptical argument and shown that knowledge is a much less difficult thing to obtain than the preponderance of philosophers seem to be inclined to argue. I applaud Bostrom for his willingness to say that “Here is a hand. I know that there is a hand here", what I am saying is not nonsensical but simply true,” (Bostrom) and I rise to my feet for the reasoning behind his claim. In light of this argument, it must be believed by a person in the habit of pursuing a course of rational inquiry that SA is not a valid objection to claims about knowledge. Claims such as those made by Bostrom regarding the nature of knowledge and the utility of *a priori* knowledge are perhaps up for debate, but any further credit given to SA is representative of a counterproductive bent and a desire to merely make things difficult, rather than to pursue truth.

Works Cited

Bostrom, Nick. "What to Say to the Skeptic." *Nick Bostrom's Home Page*. 1996. Web. 11 Dec. 2011. <http://www.nickbostrom.com/old/skepticism.html>.