Philosophia (2006) 34:303–310
DOI 10.1007/s11406-006-9018-8

AN EXCHANGE

Scepticism and Ordinary Epistemic Practice

Stephen Hetherington

Received: 31 May 2006 / Accepted: 6 June 2006 /
Published online: 22 November 2006

Abstract It is not unusual for epistemologists to argue that ordinary epistemic practice is a setting within which (infallibilist) scepticism will not arise. Such scepticism is deemed to be an alien invader, impugning such epistemic practice entirely from without. But this paper argues that the suggested sort of analysis overstates the extent to which ordinary epistemic practice is antipathetic to some vital aspects of such sceptical thinking. The paper describes how a *gradualist* analysis of knowledge can do more justice to what sceptics seek to achieve – while also showing how sceptical thinking can even be part of (and is able to have some muted epistemic impact within) ordinary epistemic practice.

Keywords Knowledge · Scepticism · Skepticism · Ordinary epistemic practice · Fallibilism · Gradualism

1. How resistant to sceptical possibilities is ordinary epistemic practice? Many epistemologists have been tempted to conceive of such practice as setting or manifesting standards which render such possibilities ineffective by being irrelevant. Indeed, it is common among epistemologists to say that ordinary contexts of inquiry are ordinary in part *because* of their being so inhospitable towards sceptical possibilities. This is particularly true (it is thought) of *infallibilist* sceptical possibilities.[1] In this paper, I question that assumption, in a way which seeks to expand our understanding of the epistemic significance of both ordinary epistemic practice and (infallibilist) sceptical thinking.[2]

[1]An infallibilist sceptical possibility is a possibility which is intended by its sceptical advocate to be incompatible with the presence of infallible justificatory support or warrant (but which might not be claimed by that sceptic to preclude fallible justificatory support or warrant).

[2]Is there much sceptical thinking that does not apply an infallibilist standard? At least some sceptical arguments that claim to rely only upon a fallibilist standard are concealedly infallibilist, as I show in "Fallibilism and Knowing That One Is Not Dreaming," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 32 (2002), 83–102.

S. Hetherington (✉)
School of Philosophy, University of New South Wales,
Sydney, NSW 2052, Australia
e-mail: s.hetherington@unsw.edu.au

2. When we ask whether a given epistemic agent is vulnerable to a specific sceptical possibility, we need to determine from where – if anywhere – that possibility gains epistemic significance. Does it *independently* possess some feature that requires us to accord it at least some respect? Or is it to be assessed in terms of factors that are internal to the agent's epistemic stance and practice? Adam Leite, it seems, has recently advocated the latter alternative:[3]

> our attributive practices treat the *strength* or *goodness* of people's epistemic position as being determined by the extent to which they possess decisive specific evidence against those possibilities of error *which there is some reason to believe or suspect to be present*.

We might call that claim *challenge conservatism*, because it tells us this:

> Ordinary epistemic practice requires us (if we are to have some particular piece of knowledge) to eliminate only possibilities that our existing reasons or evidence *already support* to some extent.[4]

And the application of that claim to sceptical possibilities is obvious. It tells us that whenever a sceptical possibility being mentioned is one which we have no existing reason (courtesy of our antecedent ordinary epistemic practice) to have regarded as being at all likely to be true, we will rightly dismiss it even without needing to find evidence against it. And the same will be true – *a fortiori* – of sceptical possibilities which have *not* been mentioned to us, and which we have had no reason to regard as being at all likely to be true.

3. However, challenge conservatism treats sceptical possibilities unreasonably. In a few respects, it could well be overstating the extent to which ordinary epistemic practice is at odds with sceptical possibilities.

First, part of being an ordinary inquirer is one's not always being so careful or restrictive in one's use of evidence. One is correlatively likely to reflect upon possibilities for which one's evidence has *not* provided any support. And although there is clearly a sense in which this is an epistemic failing, there is another sense in which it need not be. For ordinary epistemic practice can sometimes include a realisation *that* one does not always have in place the best evidence with which to investigate some particular issue. There is nothing inherently *extra*ordinary in having that kind of epistemic humility. Indeed, I suspect, ordinary epistemic practice might often incorporate a greater chance of people being open to new possibilities' being thought of and being introduced for testing – without there already having been any independent and prior establishing of the bona fides of those new ideas. It is within some forms of *less* ordinary epistemic practice, such as in technical investigations (or even – dare I say it? – philosophy), where evidence that is already in place is deemed to have the kind of epistemic authority being approved of by Leite. Such evidence – such precedent – has been put into place by designated 'authorities', after all. So, it should not be hard to understand that in this respect ordinary epistemic practice could often display *greater* open-mindedness about apparently odd possibilities than more professional or technical or academic epistemic practice does. And this open-mindedness can have epistemic benefits, with these new lines of inquiry luckily setting the 'ordinary'

[3] "Is Fallibility an Epistemological Shortcoming?," *Philosophical Quarterly* 54 (2004), 232–251, at p. 249 (final emphasis added).

[4] In different places, Leite requires one's existing evidence to provide some reason either for thinking that the sceptical possibility *is* true (e.g., p. 248) or that it *might* be true (e.g., p. 246). This distinction (and any such indeterminacy on the matter) will matter soon. See note 5.

inquirers on the path to gaining new knowledge which they would not have discovered if they had allowed themselves to ignore whatever was dismissed as being irrelevant by their existing evidence.

Accordingly, perhaps it is not inherently extraordinary to introduce even a possibility such as that of your dreaming.[5] Nevertheless, the philosophically standard analyses and arguments that *ensue*, in response to such a possibility being advanced, might themselves be rather extraordinary. Is it not so much sceptics' possibilities as such, therefore, but instead the attendant philosophical discussions of them, that are extraordinary? There is some truth in that idea, because epistemology has become quite a technical and abstract part of philosophy. But this falls well short of establishing that sceptical arguments (let alone the sceptical possibilities at their heart) should be ignored. For a start, what if sceptical arguments can be defeated?[6] Would that automatically restore our knowledge to us? At the very least, it would open up the possibility that (in principle, at any rate) there could be both comparatively ordinary knowledge that *p and* comparatively extraordinary knowledge that *p* – the latter being knowledge which includes support that has bested the sceptic, and the former being knowledge which includes support that has not fully engaged with the sceptic, let alone bested him.[7] And if this possibility is a real one, then challenge conservatism is inadequate in principle. That is because it *limits* us, from the outset, to being able to gain at most a more ordinary kind of knowledge that *p* – whereas taking the sceptical challenge seriously introduces the ideal or possibility, from the outset, of being able to gain a comparatively *extra*ordinary kind of knowledge that *p*.

4. That is an optimistic interpretation of the potential which resides within sceptical possibilities. By way of contrast, here is a pessimistic interpretation. (And we will continue to see the inadequacy of challenge conservatism.)

We might think of ordinary epistemic practice as amounting to a generalised – a not-necessarily-scientific – version of what Thomas Kuhn called normal science.[8] *Ordinary* epistemic practice is built upon *normal* inquiry (when it involves inquiry at all). This gives it several important features. It is methodologically incremental, with existing evidence guiding the inquirer in her choice of questions, her sifting of evidence, and her selecting of answers. Challenge conservatism clearly endorses such an approach. Correlatively, too, ordinary epistemic practice as such does not countenance justificatory *crises*. When these arise, ordinary epistemic practice as such ceases to be present; or so implies challenge conservatism. Accordingly, ordinary epistemic practice is a hostile environment within which to advance arguments which, if they cannot be defeated justificatorily, should *spark*

[5] Here is one possible – and not extraordinary – utterance: "He won! My horse won! I'm dreaming. I must be. Seriously, am I dreaming? Pinch me." Leite (in correspondence) asks whether a dreaming possibility could ever genuinely – neither outrageously nor laughably – arise if there is no antecedent reason in support of it. (And he doubts that this could ever occur.) But all that is needed, even for an ordinary doubt to arise, is support for a possibility *qua* possibility – as against its being actualised on the particular occasion. When Descartes introduced the possibility of his dreaming, he did so by adverting to – and thereby rendering more ordinary – his having had some deceptively life-like dreams in the past. Appropriately, this was support simply for a possibility – not the actuality – of his dreaming now.

[6] Like many other epistemologists, I have argued for the defeat of some sceptical arguments. See, for example, *Epistemology's Paradox: Is a Theory of Knowledge Possible*? (Savage MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1992), chs 1–3; "Scepticism on Scepticism", *Philosophia* 25 (1997), 323–30; *Good Knowledge, Bad Knowledge: On Two Dogmas of Epistemology* (Oxford: Clarendon Pres, 2001), ch. 2; "Fallibilism and Knowing That One Is Not Dreaming".

[7] Sections 4 and 5 will provide a fuller theoretical setting within which to understand and locate this distinction.

[8] See *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd edn (University of Chicago, 1970 [1962]).

some such crisis. But traditional sceptical arguments are intended to be like that. They are meant to bring normal epistemic practice – ordinary epistemic practice – to an end, as they develop sceptical possibilities in supposedly unanswerable sceptical ways. Sceptics as a group *mean* to spark justificatory crises, challenging whatever has hitherto been passing as normal inquiry.

Are they thereby opening up the possibility of a new Kuhnian *paradigm* being needed if inquiry is to continue? Some proponents of sceptical arguments might have that in mind; some might not. And even the former ones need not have any ideas as to what shape the new paradigm would have. They need only think that *if* whatever currently constitutes normal inquiry cannot defeat their sceptical arguments, *some* new paradigm will be required. A given sceptic-at-a-moment might even hope that her argument can be defeated; think here of Descartes in his *Meditation I*. (The sceptical thinking need not be the inquirer's settled, final, verdict on all possible inquiry – as it was not for Descartes-the-temporary-or-feigned-sceptic.) However, at the very least, any one of these sceptical thinkers is likely to believe that defeating her argument would involve an inquiry's needing to become somewhat extraordinary and abnormal. After all, her thinking can be presented in this way:

> Ordinary epistemic practice is what leads an epistemic agent to have her ordinary empirical beliefs, for example, confident in their being well supported by empirical evidence. However, not only these beliefs and that evidence, but also the 'surrounding' ordinary epistemic practice, would remain as they are even if the sceptical possibility is true. And this is a serious epistemic failing. Even if in fact you are dreaming, you will still *seem* to yourself not to be dreaming; and, equally, your ordinary epistemic practice will still seem to you to be in order. Hence, insofar as the sceptical possibility thereby reveals an epistemic weakness in that kind of *evidence-belief* relation (namely, in the strength – or lack of it – with which your sensory evidence supports your empirical beliefs), it exposes a correlative weakness in the *ordinary epistemic practice* as a whole within which that kind of evidence–belief relation is constituted and applied. There are thus analogous instances of under-determination – of true belief by evidence in particular, and of true belief by ordinary epistemic practice in general.

The sceptic will therefore regard what Kuhn might call normal inquiry – and what we are calling ordinary epistemic practice – as having an epistemic deficiency, not just in its details, but at its core. The supposed deficiency is the inability in principle of normal inquiry to be anything other *than* normal. If her challenge is ever to be met (the given sceptic will continue), the resulting knowledge would need to be quite *extraordinary* knowledge that p – far from ordinary knowledge that p. And even a non-sceptic should accord the sceptic the coherence of this description, at least as a description of a conceivable ideal, even if not of a practicable outcome. Nonetheless, even when considered purely as an ideal, it is overlooked by challenge conservatism's conception of the possibilities for interplay between ordinary epistemic practice, justification, and knowledge.

5. How might we conceive of knowledge so as to be able to accommodate the thinking that emerges from sections 3 and 4? Leite believes that knowledge-attributions within ordinary contexts of inquiry have no epistemic failings when compared with infallible knowledge. But that belief apparently relies upon challenge conservatism – which, we have found, does not succeed in its description of ordinary epistemic practice as not needing to pay attention to sceptical possibilities. Even ordinary epistemic practice can allow that

sceptics are denying us something worth having (all else being equal) as knowers – indeed, something *more* worth having than the best we can have if we do not even try to defeat the sceptical arguments. And ordinary epistemic practice can do this while not conceding (as the sceptic will claim) that only whatever it is that would survive or defeat the sceptic *is* knowledge.

Or so I say; and I have a simple suggestion as to how we might model all of this within our conception of knowledge. Let us return to the earlier distinction, which (in section 3) was left somewhat vague, between *normal* or *ordinary* knowledge that *p* and *extraordinary* knowledge that *p*. And let us not treat this distinction as a final one. Rather, we may view it merely as a means of gesturing at a more *general* aspect of knowledge. In particular, we may accept that the concept of knowledge allows even a particular piece of knowledge that *p* to have an epistemically *qualitative* dimension. Extraordinary knowledge that *p* is epistemically *better*, all else being equal, than is ordinary knowledge that *p*. That is, it would be better, considered purely as knowledge that *p*. And if that is so, then, more generally, knowledge that *p* can be better or worse as knowledge that *p* (where this distinction is made purely on epistemic grounds, not on pragmatic ones, say). For example, suppose that yesterday you knew that *p* on the basis of evidence *e*, whereas today you know that *p* on the basis of evidence *e**. And suppose that *e** provides better evidential support for the belief that *p* than *e* does. Given all of that, we should infer that today you know that *p better* than you did yesterday (other things being equal). Because you have improved your evidence for *p*'s being the case (and with all else having remained equal), your knowledge that *p* has improved. And the improvement has been epistemic. The improvement in the knowledge that *p* has been due to the improvement purely in its main epistemic aspect – its evidential or justificatory *component*.

That gradualist (proto-)conception of knowledge – which I am proposing as being potentially useful, not purporting to have proved to be conceptually inescapable – is readily applied to debates with sceptics.[9] When knowledge that *p* is attributed within an ordinary context of epistemic practice, what is being attributed *is* ordinary knowledge that *p* (other things being equal) – *qualititatively* ordinary knowledge that *p*.[10] But in principle, we have seen just now, there is a possibility of some knowledge that *p* being of a higher epistemic quality. For instance, in principle there could be some knowledge that *p* which is of an *extra*ordinarily high quality. This epistemically extraordinary knowledge that *p* would involve much better evidence, say – indeed, *extraordinarily* better evidence. And it is this possibility that is being highlighted by sceptics. Maybe within an ordinary context of inquiry infallibility is not being demanded. Perhaps a sceptical request for infallibility is even out of place within any such context. However, that need not be because it is always inappropriate. It might be out of place within any ordinary context of inquiry simply *because* the latter context is ordinary. This does not entail that in an extraordinary context infallibility is also out of place. And, equally, it does not follow that when infallibility is being demanded, ordinary knowledge that *p* is still being sought. Rather, within that context, *extra*ordinary knowledge that *p* would be at stake – knowledge that *p*, based on extraordinary justification (such as the sceptic is asking the inquirer to have). In effect, therefore, the sceptic is trying to change the context of inquiry, from an ordinary one to an extraordinary one. That aspect of sceptical practice is readily acknowledged by

[9] In *Good Knowledge*, *Bad Knowledge*, ch. 2, I show this in more detail.

[10] Strictly, we should distinguish between grades or degrees of such ordinariness. Contexts of ordinary epistemic practice could be *more or less* epistemically ordinary, as can the knowledge within them. I will continue using the simpler formulation, though.

epistemologists. But what also needs to be realised is that the sceptic is thereby attempting to prompt the inquirer to seek what I am calling drastically *improved* knowledge that *p*. She is advocating a need for the inquirer's knowledge that *p* to be located much further along what amounts to a spectrum containing all of the possible epistemic qualities of knowledge that *p*.

Of course, sceptics do not usually formulate their challenges in quite those terms. Such terms are my contribution to the debate. And they allow the following description of that debate. In effect, sceptics are saying that the only possible way to know that *p* is by having an extraordinary quality of knowledge that *p*. To most of us (and to ordinary epistemic practitioners), that sounds mistaken. But it is possible to make a fundamentally similar, although nominally converse, mistake. That is what we would do, for example, if we were to endorse challenge conservatism. For at least insofar as we would be taking challenge conservatism to define the range of settings within which knowledge may arise, we would be ruling out the possibility, even in principle, of extraordinary knowledge that *p*. Presumably we would do this because such knowledge could only ever arise *outside* ordinary epistemic practice. So, impliedly, we would be thinking that the only kind of knowledge that *p* is *ordinary* knowledge that *p*: we could know that *p* only ordinarily. On that approach (which I believe to be Leite's), because any knowledge that *p* would be ordinary knowledge that *p*, the sceptic is wrong to require anything of a greater epistemic quality. Conversely, on the sceptic's approach, because any knowledge that *p* would be extraordinary knowledge that *p*, non-sceptics are wrong to settle for anything of a lesser epistemic quality. And each of those combatants – Leite and the sceptic – is thereby mistaken at a more fundamental level. Once we allow the conceptual possibility of different instances of knowledge that *p* being of higher *or* lower epistemic qualities, we may accept that a given case of knowledge that *p* can be ordinary *or* it can be extraordinary.[11]

However, epistemologists generally overlook that possibility, because they rely upon a *qualitative absolutism* about propositional knowledge. They presume that all possible instances of knowledge that *p* share only one possible epistemic quality (relative to the highly simplified enumeration I have given of the potential range of such qualities) *as* cases of knowledge that *p*. Leite, for example, apparently opts for all possible knowledge's being qualitatively ordinary – hence being quite attainable, at least in principle. On the other hand, sceptics believe that all possible knowledge would be qualitatively extraordinary – which renders it quite unattainable, even in principle. Yet both Leite and the sceptics are mistaken. Because in principle there can be both better and worse knowledge that *p*, in principle there can be both ordinary knowledge that *p* and extraordinary knowledge that *p*. And to realise this is to change the terms of the usual debate between sceptic and non-sceptics. It is to place ordinary knowledge that *p* and extraordinary knowledge that *p on the same epistemic scale*, a scale of possible epistemic qualities for knowledge that *p* – presumably ranging from bad to excellent, encompassing better and worse.[12] And it is thereby to reject those recurrent attempts to interpret non-sceptics and sceptics as being engaged in different *kinds* of evaluation of any putative piece of knowledge that *p*. A qualitative gradualism about knowledge allows us to classify those differences between sceptics and non-sceptics as being ones of degree or quality, not of kind.

[11] Again (as the previous note observed), we should recognise that each of these terms has a qualitative dimension. There are further epistemic degrees to be considered, if only because there are degrees of ordinariness and of extraordinariness. But, for simplicity, I continue leaving this complication to one side.

[12] And how epistemically bad can knowledge that *p* be? For an argument for its being able to be very bad indeed, see my *Good Knowledge, Bad Knowledge*, ch. 4. For a less extreme position, see my "Knowledge's Boundary Problem", *Synthese* 150 (2006), 41–56.

6. Does *contextualism* about knowledge-attributions offer us that same interpretative option? I do not believe so, and I will end the paper by indicating a key difference between contextualism and my rejection of qualitative knowledge-absolutism.[13]

Such contextualists as David Lewis,[14] Stewart Cohen,[15] and Keith DeRose[16] accept that within different contexts of knowledge-attribution there can be different epistemic standards in place. Consequently, they will accept that, both yesterday and today, you might be accurately described as knowing that p – where, each time, you could be satisfying a different minimal epistemic standard for having that knowledge. And this contextualist interpretation might seem to accomplish (at least in terms of knowledge-attributions, rather than of knowledge-possession as such) what I was advocating in Section 5. For it might seem to amount to rejecting (in its meta-linguistic way) an epistemic absolutism which says that all cases of knowledge that p are only ever – *qua* knowledge – of one epistemic quality. It would do so (if at all) by denying that all attributions of knowledge that p are applying the same shared epistemic standard.

However, I maintain, these contextualists are covert absolutists in their respective attributions of knowledge. Each contextualist is accepting, even if implicitly, that *within* each context of knowledge-attribution knowledge-absolutism is to be applied. A single *deeper* epistemically qualitative standard is being applied by them within each context. The standard in question is that of expecting the epistemic agent to eliminate *every* relevant or salient alternative or possibility. Thus, even if different not-p alternatives are allowed to be relevant within different contexts of knowledge-assessment, knowledge that p is attributed within a given context (other things being equal) if and only if, within that context, *every* relevant alternative is deemed to be eliminated by the epistemic agent. The latter epistemic standard (or some version of it) is being applied in each context of knowledge-attribution. And that standard is qualitatively absolutist. It accepts that *any* attribution of knowledge that p is answerable to *all* relevant alternatives being deemed to be eliminated: nothing less will do; nothing more is possible.

In contrast, the gradualist form of analysis that I have suggested would be non-absolutist even *within* a given context. In section 5 I was talking about contexts of knowledge-possession, whereas contextualists generally focus upon contexts of knowledge-attribution. But my basic point remains the same, *mutatis mutandis*. I do not presume that, even *within* a context of knowledge-attribution, there is a need for all relevant alternatives to be deemed to be eliminated if knowledge is to be attributed (just as I do not presume that, within a context of inquiry, there is a need for all relevant alternatives to be eliminated if knowledge is to be present). Instead, my gradualist view is that (while assuming all else to be equal) the *more* alternatives there are that are eliminated by an epistemic agent x, the *better* is x's

[13] Many contemporary epistemologists seem to assume that if we are not to accept an absolutism or an invariantism – as Peter Unger calls it, in *Philosophical Relativity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) – about knowledge that p, then we must accept contextualism instead. John Hawthorne is a recent case of someone accepting that dichotomy's exhaustiveness: *Knowledge and Lotteries* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004). But section 5 introduced a further non-absolutist conceptual option, and in the present section I show how it transcends contextualism.

[14] "Elusive Knowledge," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74 (1996), 549–67.

[15] "Knowledge and Context," *Journal of Philosophy* 83 (1986), 574–585; "Skepticism, Relevance, and Relativity," in *Dretske and His Critics*, (ed.) B. P. McLaughlin (Cambridge, Massachusetts.: Blackwell, 1991), 17–37.

[16] "Solving the Skeptical Problem," *Philosophical Review* 104 (1995), 1–52; "Contextualism: An Explanation and Defense," in John Greco and Ernest Sosa (eds.), *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1999), 187–205.

knowledge that p – considered purely epistemically, purely as knowledge that p.[17] And this could be so, even *within* an ordinary context of attribution. Indeed, it is the ordinariness *itself* that allows for this variability. In general, extraordinariness is less likely to do so, with there being a smaller possible *range* – along any particular dimension, such as I am assuming the epistemic one to be[18] – within which to be extraordinary.[19]

And so we may accept the following scenario as being coherent. Suppose that you and I share a normal context c of inquiry. We each come to know that p within c (and to be deemed from within another context c* to do so). This occurs, even while we are having (and being deemed from within c* to have) different *qualities* of knowledge that p within c. And in part this potential variability can be present *because* of c's ordinariness – which, in a Wittgensteinian spirit, can be interpreted in different ways from different perspectives, and can accommodate ordinary variabilities. Two ordinary epistemic agents can, within the one context c, have *differing* qualities of knowledge that p. And they can be accorded, from within another context c*, those differing qualities of knowledge that p within c. Contextualism, however, does not obviously model this situation.[20] Contextualist semantics thus differs from gradualism's modelling of knowledge – possibly to the former's detriment.[21]

Acknowledgment Thanks to Adam Leite for his comments on drafts of this paper.

[17] And the more *relevant* are the alternatives which are eliminated, the more relevant (other things being equal) is the knowledge which is thereby constituted. That is the core of how I reconceive the epistemic role of the relevance of an alternative, as I have explained elsewhere: *Good Knowledge*, *Bad Knowledge*, pp. 54–56.

[18] This is a simplifying assumption, made for the purposes of this paper. The epistemic dimension is here being assumed simply to be justificatory.

[19] The range of extraordinariness will be restricted to a smaller possible domain of values, with all of them being of an especially high standard: each of them needs to be – to some extent or other – 'extraordinarily good.' In contrast, the range of comparative ordinariness encompasses a larger possible domain of values, such as from those that are 'barely adequate' to those that are 'just short of extraordinarily good.'

[20] Lewis claimed ("Elusive Knowledge," pp. 562–563) to do so. Elsewhere (*Good Knowledge*, *Bad Knowledge*, pp. 52–54), I have denied that he succeeded.

[21] For related remarks on contextualism's possible inadequacy, see Igor Douven, "The Context-Insensitivity of 'Knowing More' and 'Knowing Better'," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 34 (2004), 313–326.