

Knowledge and Reality, Lecture 10

Brian Weatherson

2022-10-03

Two Sceptical Arguments

Dismissive

Pyrrhonian scepticism

Academic Scepticism

Positive Arguments for Anti-Scepticism

Two Sceptical Arguments

1. Pyrrhonian scepticism

Two Sceptical Arguments

1. Pyrrhonian scepticism
2. Academic scepticism

Pyrrhonian scepticism

1. All knowledge is by some method or other.

Pyrrhonian scepticism

1. All knowledge is by some method or other.
2. A method only produces knowledge if the user knows it is reliable.

Pyrrhonian scepticism

1. All knowledge is by some method or other.
2. A method only produces knowledge if the user knows it is reliable.
3. So there can be no first knowledge.

Pyrrhonian scepticism

1. All knowledge is by some method or other.
2. A method only produces knowledge if the user knows it is reliable.
3. So there can be no first knowledge.
4. So there is no knowledge.

Academic Scepticism

1. To have ordinary knowledge, we must know that disaster scenarios can't obtain.

Academic Scepticism

1. To have ordinary knowledge, we must know that disaster scenarios can't obtain.
2. We can't know that disaster scenarios don't obtain.

Academic Scepticism

1. To have ordinary knowledge, we must know that disaster scenarios can't obtain.
2. We can't know that disaster scenarios don't obtain.
3. So we don't have ordinary knowledge.

Three Kinds of Response

1. Dismissive

Three Kinds of Response

1. Dismissive
2. Objecting to premises/steps

Three Kinds of Response

1. Dismissive
2. Objecting to premises/steps
3. Supplying positive argument for knowledge

Two Sceptical Arguments

Dismissive

Pyrrhonian scepticism

Academic Scepticism

Positive Arguments for Anti-Scepticism

Dismissive

A popular mid-20C response, often associated with Wittgenstein.

- We should ignore scepticism because it is obviously ridiculous.

Dismissive

An 18C variant, associated with David Hume (though really not Hume's own view.)

- We should ignore scepticism because we are incapable of taking it seriously.

A Reply

There are things we should be sceptical about, such as claims made on behalf of new technologies.

- It is easy for that kind of scepticism to go too far.

A Reply

There are things we should be sceptical about, such as claims made on behalf of new technologies.

- It is easy for that kind of scepticism to go too far.
- One reason (my reason) to carefully formulate arguments for global scepticism is to see which premises are out of bounds in everyday sceptical reasoning.

A Reply

If a reason to be sceptical of a person/method/claim/theory would generalise to be a reason to be sceptical of the external world, then it's a bad reason.

- This turns out to be a surprisingly powerful principle.

Two Targets

1. People who argue for scepticism in a particular domain.

Two Targets

1. People who argue for scepticism in a particular domain.
2. People who argue for positive theories on the grounds that all other theories would lead to scepticism in that domain.

Two Targets

1. People who argue for scepticism in a particular domain.
 2. People who argue for positive theories on the grounds that all other theories would lead to scepticism in that domain.
- In both cases, asking whether their arguments would imply global scepticism is a worthwhile question.

Two Sceptical Arguments

Dismissive

Pyrrhonian scepticism

Academic Scepticism

Positive Arguments for Anti-Scepticism

Pyrrhonian scepticism - Responses

1. Self-defeating

Pyrrhonian scepticism - Responses

1. Self-defeating
2. Deny premise 2

Pyrrhonian scepticism - Responses

1. Self-defeating
2. Deny premise 2
3. Deny inference from 1 and 2 to 3.

Pyrrhonian scepticism - Responses

1. Self-defeating
2. Deny premise 2
3. Deny inference from 1 and 2 to 3.
4. Deny inference from 3 to 4.

Pyrrhonian scepticism - Self-defeating

- The premises of the argument can't be known, since nothing can be known.

Pyrrhonian scepticism - Self-defeating

- The premises of the argument can't be known, since nothing can be known.
- So we have no reason to believe what the Pyrrhonian says.

Pyrrhonian scepticism - P2

- Reliabilists say that it is enough that the method is actually reliable; it doesn't have to be known to be reliable.

Pyrrhonian scepticism - Step 3

- Some Indian traditions deny the move from 1, 2 to 3.

Pyrrhonian scepticism - Step 3

- Some Indian traditions deny the move from 1, 2 to 3.
- They say that you can come to know that the method you are using is reliable at the same time you use it.

Pyrrhonian scepticism - Step 3

- Some Indian traditions deny the move from 1, 2 to 3.
- They say that you can come to know that the method you are using is reliable at the same time you use it.
- What they deny is that the knowledge of reliability has to come before the use of it; it could be simultaneous.

Pyrrhonian scepticism - Step 3

- Some Indian traditions deny the move from 1, 2 to 3.
- They say that you can come to know that the method you are using is reliable at the same time you use it.
- What they deny is that the knowledge of reliability has to come before the use of it; it could be simultaneous.
- In those cases, the output of the method and the knowledge it is reliable would be 'equal first' knowledge.

Infinetism

- Maybe there can be no first knowledge, but we have an infinite amount of knowledge.

Infinitism

- Maybe there can be no first knowledge, but we have an infinite amount of knowledge.
- It's not clear to me exactly how this is supposed to work, but for completeness I should note that infinitism is one of the options here.

Two Sceptical Arguments

Dismissive

Pyrrhonian scepticism

Academic Scepticism

Positive Arguments for Anti-Scepticism

Limits of Academic Scepticism

It can only show us that we don't know things that are false in plausible 'disaster scenarios'.

- So it can't be used to defeat knowledge that $2+2=4$, or that we have minds.

Disaster Scenarios

A disaster scenario is one in which

1. We have the same evidence we actually do; but

Disaster Scenarios

A disaster scenario is one in which

1. We have the same evidence we actually do; but
2. Some things we ordinarily take to be true are not true.

Disaster Scenarios

A disaster scenario is one in which

1. We have the same evidence we actually do; but
 2. Some things we ordinarily take to be true are not true.
- So it turns a lot on what counts as evidence.

Evidence

Most sceptics assume that evidence is something like phenomenology.

- This is very much up for debate.

Evidence

Most sceptics assume that evidence is something like phenomenology.

- This is very much up for debate.
- The Indian realists (especially Nyāya) rejected it, and we'll see lots of reasons to reject it going forward.

Disaster Scenario

Sceptics normally don't care about whether the scenarios they use are realistic.

- As we'll hopefully touch on at the end, anti-sceptics sometimes do care about that.

Why Believe Premise 2

1. Raw intuition

Why Believe Premise 2

1. Raw intuition
2. Sensitivity

Why Believe Premise 2

1. Raw intuition
2. Sensitivity
3. Defensibility

Why Believe Premise 2

1. Raw intuition
2. Sensitivity
3. Defensibility
4. Method

Raw Intuition

Problems:

1. Not everyone has the intuition.

Raw Intuition

Problems:

1. Not everyone has the intuition.
2. The intuitions that (a) we know we have hands, and (b) if we know we have hands we can deduce that we are not, e.g., HBLVs, are stronger.

Sensitivity

We talked about this already.

- The belief that I'm not in a disaster scenario is not sensitive.

Sensitivity

We talked about this already.

- The belief that I'm not in a disaster scenario is not sensitive.
- But sensitivity leads to weird results in things like the Potemkin village case.

Defensibility

The sceptic's idea here is that we only know something if we can defend that belief to a critic.

- But this is a very strong claim.

Defensibility

The sceptic's idea here is that we only know something if we can defend that belief to a critic.

- But this is a very strong claim.
- Try defending the view that there are some reasons (for beliefs, actions, whatever) to a reasons sceptic.

Defensibility

The sceptic's idea here is that we only know something if we can defend that belief to a critic.

- But this is a very strong claim.
- Try defending the view that there are some reasons (for beliefs, actions, whatever) to a reasons sceptic.
- Taken seriously, this would turn academic scepticism into the less plausible Pyrrhonian scepticism.

Method

Lots of (western) philosophers have thought that everything we know comes from one of two methods.

1. Observation

Method

Lots of (western) philosophers have thought that everything we know comes from one of two methods.

1. Observation
2. Pure Reason

Method

Lots of (western) philosophers have thought that everything we know comes from one of two methods.

1. Observation
 2. Pure Reason
- Question: By which of these do we know we're not in a disaster scenario?

A Better Sceptical Argument

1. If we know we're not in a disaster scenario, we know this by observation or pure reason.

A Better Sceptical Argument

1. If we know we're not in a disaster scenario, we know this by observation or pure reason.
2. We can't know this by observation, since observation doesn't distinguish normal from disaster scenarios.

A Better Sceptical Argument

1. If we know we're not in a disaster scenario, we know this by observation or pure reason.
2. We can't know this by observation, since observation doesn't distinguish normal from disaster scenarios.
3. We can't know this by pure reason, since the only things we can rule out by pure reason are impossibilities.

A Better Sceptical Argument

1. If we know we're not in a disaster scenario, we know this by observation or pure reason.
2. We can't know this by observation, since observation doesn't distinguish normal from disaster scenarios.
3. We can't know this by pure reason, since the only things we can rule out by pure reason are impossibilities.
4. So we don't know we're not in a disaster scenario.

A Better Sceptical Argument

- Every premise there is debatable.

A Better Sceptical Argument

- Every premise there is debatable.
- But unlike other sceptical arguments, it isn't clear just which premise fails.

Two Sceptical Arguments

Dismissive

Pyrrhonian scepticism

Academic Scepticism

Positive Arguments for Anti-Scepticism

Two Positive Arguments

1. Inference to the Best Explanation

Two Positive Arguments

1. Inference to the Best Explanation
2. Reliable Observation

IBE

- We have a bunch of evidence, let's say along with the sceptic that it's phenomenal.

IBE

- We have a bunch of evidence, let's say along with the sceptic that it's phenomenal.
- What's the best explanation for this evidence?

IBE

- We have a bunch of evidence, let's say along with the sceptic that it's phenomenal.
- What's the best explanation for this evidence?
- Arguably, the existence of an external world.

Problems

- Well, there are simpler explanations, like God created you and you alone.

Problems

- Well, there are simpler explanations, like God created you and you alone.
- And maybe there are more complicated but more plausible ones, like that you're a video game character.

Reliable Observation

- As a matter of fact I know things, because as a matter of fact my senses are reliable.

Reliable Observation

- As a matter of fact I know things, because as a matter of fact my senses are reliable.
- Of course, how I know this is a hard question.

Reliable Observations

Two moves at this point:

- Deny that it matters whether I know that I know; knowledge is enough.

Reliable Observations

Two moves at this point:

- Deny that it matters whether I know that I know; knowledge is enough.
- Say that I'm also pretty good at telling reliable from unreliable observers apart, and using that skill I can tell that I'm one of the reliable ones.

Problem

I'm not actually that reliable; I dream a lot.

Responses

- Dreams aren't really beliefs, so my belief forming capacities are reliable.

Responses

- Dreams aren't really beliefs, so my belief forming capacities are reliable.
- I'm reliable when I'm awake, and that's enough.
Compare an athlete who can do one very specific thing well; they might be reliably successful even if they would fail were circumstances different.

For Next Time

- We'll move onto Pasnau's book.