

Scepticism, Rationalism, and Externalism

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This paper is about three of the most prominent debates in modern epistemology. The conclusion is that three *prima facie* appealing positions in these debates cannot be held simultaneously.

The first debate is **scepticism vs anti-scepticism**. My conclusions apply to *most* kinds of debates between sceptics and their opponents, but I will focus on the inductive sceptic, who claims we cannot come to know what will happen in the future by induction. This is a fairly weak kind of scepticism, and I suspect many philosophers who are generally anti-sceptical are attracted by this kind of scepticism. Still, even this kind of scepticism is quite unintuitive. I'm pretty sure I know (1) on the basis of induction.

1. It will snow in Ithaca next winter.

Although I am taking a very strong version of anti-scepticism to be intuitively true here, the points I make will generalise to most other versions of scepticism. (Focussing on the inductive sceptic avoids some potential complications that I will note as they arise.)

The second debate is a version of **rationalism vs empiricism**. The kind of rationalist I have in mind accepts that some deeply contingent propositions can be known a priori, and the empiricist I have in mind denies this. Kripke showed that there are *contingent* propositions that can be known a priori. One example is *Water is the watery stuff of our acquaintance*. ('Watery' is David Chalmers's nice term for the properties of water by which folk identify it.) All the examples Kripke gave are of propositions that are, to use Gareth Evans's term, deeply necessary (?). It is a matter of controversy presently just how to analyse Evans's concepts of deep necessity and contingency, but most of the controversies are over details that are not important right here. I'll simply adopt Stephen Yablo's recent suggestion: a proposition is

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deeply contingent if it could have *turned out* to be true, and could have *turned out* to be false [Yablo (?)]¹. Kripke did not provide examples of any *deeply* contingent propositions knowable a priori, though nothing he showed rules out their existence.

The final debate is a version of **internalism vs externalism** about epistemic justification. The internalist I have in mind endorses a very weak kind of access internalism. Say that a class of properties (intuitively, a determinable) is *introspective* iff any beliefs an agent has about which property in the class (which determinate) she instantiates are guaranteed to not be too badly mistaken.² (Since ‘too badly’ is vague, ‘introspective’ will be vague too, but as we’ll see this won’t matter to the main argument.) My internalist believes the following two claims:

- Which propositions an agent can justifiably believe supervenes in which introspective properties she instantiates, and this is knowable a priori.³
- There exist some introspective properties and some deeply contingent propositions about the future such that it’s a priori that whoever instantiates those properties can justifiably believe those propositions.

My externalist denies one or other of these claims. Typically, she holds that no matter what introspective properties you have, unless some external condition is satisfied (such as the reliability of the connection between instantiating those properties and the world being the way you believe it is) you lack justification. Alternatively, she holds that the connection between introspective properties and justification is always a posteriori. (Or, of course, she might deny both.)

My argument will be that the combination of anti-scepticism, empiricism and internalism is untenable. Since there’s quite a bit to be said for each of these claims individually, that their combination is untenable means we are stuck with a fairly hard choice: accept scepticism, or rationalism, or externalism. Of the three, it *may* seem that externalism is the best, but given how weak the version of internalism is that I’m using, I think we should take the rationalist option seriously.⁴ In this paper I’ll just argue against the combination of anti-scepticism, empiricism and internalism, and leave it to the reader to judge which of the three to reject.

¹ If you prefer the ‘two-dimensional’ way of talking, a deeply contingent proposition is one that is true in some possible world ‘considered as actual’. See Chalmers (?) for a thorough discussion of ways to interpret this phrase, and the broader notion of so-called ‘deep’ contingency. Nothing that goes on here will turn on any of the fine distinctions made in that debate - the relevant propositions will be deeply contingent in every plausible sense.

² That a property is introspective does not mean that whenever a subject instantiates it she is in a position to form a not too badly mistaken belief about it. Even if the subject instantiates the property she may not possess sufficient concepts in order to have beliefs about it. And even if she has the concept she may simply have more pressing cognitive needs than forming certain kinds of belief. Many agents have no beliefs about the smell in their ordinary environment much of the time, for example, and this does not show that phenomenal smell properties are not introspective. All that is required is that if she has any beliefs at all about which determinate she instantiates, the beliefs are immune to massive error.

³ There is a delicate ambiguity in this expression to which a referee drew my attention. The intended meaning is that for any two agents who instantiate the same introspective properties, belief in the same propositions is justified. What’s not intended is that if there’s an agent who justifiably believes p , and the introspective properties they instantiate are F_1, \dots, F_n , then any agent who instantiates F_1, \dots, F_n is justified in believing p . For there might be some other introspective property F_{n+1} they instantiate that justifies belief in q , and q might be a defeater for p . The ‘unintended’ claim would be a very strong, and very implausible, claim about the subvenient basis for justification.

⁴ Rationalism is supported by Bonjour (?) and Hawthorne (?), and my argument owes a lot to each of their discussions.

Very roughly, the argument for the trilemma will be as follows. There are some propositions q such that these three claims are true.

2. If anti-scepticism is true, then I either know q a priori or a posteriori.
3. If internalism and empiricism is true, I do not know q a priori.⁵
4. If internalism is true, I do not know q a posteriori.

Much of the paper will be spent giving us the resources to find, and state, such a q , but to a first approximation, think of q as being a proposition like *I am not a brain-in-a-vat whose experiences are as if they were a normal person*.⁶ The important features of q are that (a) it is entailed by propositions we take ourselves to know, (b) it is possibly false and (c) if something is evidence for it, then any evidence is evidence for it. I will claim that by looking at propositions like this, propositions that say in effect that I am not being misled in a certain way, it is possible to find a value for q such that (2), (3) and (4) are all true. From that it follows that

For most of the paper I will assume that internalism and anti-scepticism are true, and use those hypotheses to derive rationalism. The paper will conclude with a detailed look at the role internalism plays in the argument, and this will give us some sense of what an anti-sceptical empiricist externalism may look like.

0.1 A Sceptical Argument

Among the many things I know about future, one of the firmest is (1).

1. It will snow in Ithaca next winter.

I know this on the basis of inductive evidence about the length of meteorological cycles and the recent history of Ithaca in winter. The inductive sceptic now raises the spectre of Winter Wonderland, a kind of world that usually has the same meteorological cycles as ours, and has the same history, but in which it is sunny every day in Ithaca next winter.⁷ She says that to know (1) we must know that (5) is false, and we do not.

5. I am living in Winter Wonderland.

⁵ Aesthetically it would be preferable to have the antecedent of this claim be just that empiricism is true, but unfortunately this does not seem to be possible.

⁶ I.e. I am not a brain-in-a-vat* in the sense of Cohen (1999)

⁷ If she is convinced that there is no possible world with the *same* history as ours and no snow in Ithaca next winter, the sceptic will change her story so Winter Wonderland's past differs imperceptibly from the past in our world. She doesn't think this issue is particularly relevant to the *epistemological* debate, no matter how interesting the scientific and metaphysical issues may be, and I agree with her.

Just how does reflection (5) affect my confidence that I know (1)? The sceptic might just appeal to the intuition that I don't know that (5) is false. But I don't think I have that intuition, and if I do it is much weaker than my intuition that I know (1) and that I can infer (5) from (1). James Pryor (?) has suggested the sceptic is better off using (5) in the following interesting argument.⁸

6. Either you don't know you're not living in Winter Wonderland; or, if you do know that, it's because that knowledge rests in part on your inductive knowledge that it will snow in Ithaca next winter.
7. If you're to know (1) on the basis of certain experiences or grounds e , then for every q which is "bad" relative to e and (1), you have to be in a position to know q to be false in a non-question-begging way—i.e., you have to be in a position to know q to be false antecedently to knowing that it will snow next winter on the basis of e .
8. (5) is "bad" relative to any course of experience e and (1).
9. You can't know (1), that it will snow next winter on the basis of your current experiences.

An alternative hypothesis q is "bad" in the sense used here iff (to quote Pryor) "it has the special features that characterise the sceptic's scenarios—whatever those features turn out to be." (527) To a first approximation, q is bad relative to p and e iff you're meant to be able to know p on the basis of e , but q is apparently compatible with e , even though it is not compatible with p .

Pryor argues that the best response to the external world sceptic is **dogmatism**. On this theory you can know p on the basis of e even though you have no prior reason to rule out alternatives to p compatible with e . Pryor only defends the dogmatic response to the external world sceptic, but it's worth considering the dogmatist response to inductive scepticism. According to this response, I *can* come to know I'm not in Winter Wonderland on the basis of my experiences to date, even though I didn't know this a priori. So dogmatism is a version of empiricism, and it endorses (6).⁹ The false premise in this argument, according to the dogmatist, is (7). We can know it will snow even though the Winter Wonderland hypothesis is bad relative to this

⁸ Pryor is discussing the external world sceptic, not the inductive sceptic, so the premises here are a little different to those he provides.

⁹ It is a version of the kind of internalism discussed in footnote 2, since according to the dogmatist seeming to see that p can be sufficient justification for belief in p . Pryor's preferred version of dogmatism is also internalist in the slightly stronger sense described in the text, but it seems possible that one could be a dogmatist without accepting that internalist thesis. One could accept, for instance, that seeming to see that p justifies a belief that p , but also think that seeming to see that q justifies a belief that p iff there is a known reliable connection between q and p . As I said, even the weaker version of internalism is sufficient to generate a conflict with anti-scepticism and empiricism, provided we just focus on the propositions that can be justified by seeming to see that p .

conclusion and our actual evidence, and we have no prior way to exclude it.

Pryor notes that the sceptic could offer a similar argument concerning justification, and the dogmatist offers a similar response.

9. Either you're not justified in believing that you're not in Winter Wonderland; or, if you are justified in believing this, it's because that justification rests in part on your justified belief that it will snow in Ithaca next winter.
10. If you're to have justification for believing (1) on the basis of certain experiences or grounds e , then for every q which is "bad" relative to e and (1), you have to have antecedent justification for believing q to be false—justification which doesn't rest on or presuppose any e -based justification you may have for believing (1).
11. (5) is "bad" relative to any course of experience e you could have and (1).
12. You can't justifiably believe it will snow in Ithaca next winter on the basis of past experiences.

The dogmatist rejects (10), just as she rejects (7). I shall spend most of my time in the next two sections arguing for (10), returning to (7) only at the end. For it seems there are compelling reasons to accept (10), and hold that the problem with this argument is either with (9) or (11).¹⁰

¹⁰ Just which is wrong then? That depends on how "bad" is defined. On our final definition (8) will fail, but there are other sceptical arguments, using other sceptical hypotheses, on which (6) fails.

0.2 Dominance Arguments

The primary argument for (10) will turn on a dominance principle: if you will be in a position to justifiably believe p whatever evidence you get, and you know this, then you are now justified in believing p . This kind of reasoning is perfectly familiar in decision theory: if you know that one of n states obtains, and you know that in each of those states you should do X rather than Y, then you know now (or at least you should know) that you should do X rather than Y. This is a very plausible principle, and equivalent epistemic principles are just as viable. Dominance reasoning can directly support (10) and hence indirectly support (7). (As Vann McGee (?) showed, the dominance principle in decision theory has to be qualified for certain kinds of