

Philosophical Skepticism: Taking Knowledge Out of Context

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The position of pure philosophical skepticism holds that, in order to justify our knowledge of the world, we must base our justification on something outside of that knowledge itself. According to the skeptic, unless we can provide this external justification, our claims to have knowledge of anything outside of our own mind are spurious. The skeptic thus demands some foundation, in the form of epistemologically certain principles, on which all other human knowledge can be based. If these foundational principles do not exist, then the ultimate ramification of the skeptical position would be that we can never actually know anything, and that all of our attempts to develop knowledge through observation or experience are futile and meaningless.

This conclusion is profoundly unsettling, and has been attacked by many philosophers. C.S. Peirce rejects the skeptical position as impractical, and advocates instead for a scientific method that presumes correspondence to an external world as a necessary condition of fixing belief. Michael Williams, on the other hand, rejects both Peirce's presumption and the 'foundationalism' of the skeptics, and instead introduces a 'contextualism' in which our knowledge is dependent on the context in which it is generated or applied. This paper will draw on a mixture of the ideas of both to move beyond the skeptics' objections and to defend the search for knowledge as a meaningful enterprise.

In his essay 'The Fixation of Belief,' Peirce begins by noting that, as humans, we are inexorably driven to rid ourselves of doubts by replacing them with beliefs. Peirce then identifies four methods which people use to develop beliefs. He is dismissive of the first three methods: tenacity, in which a person clings to beliefs by ignoring evidence to the contrary; authority, in which beliefs are imposed from above by institutions; and the *a priori* method, in which an aesthetic sense of what 'feels' right decides what is believed. It is fourth method, which Peirce refers to as "the method of science," that he ultimately champions. The goal of science, Peirce writes, is to find a means "by which our beliefs may be determined by nothing human, but by some external permanency – by something upon which our thinking has no effect." Peirce advises his readers that they "should consider well" of the first methods and then decide that they "wish [their] opinions to coincide with fact, and that there is no reason why the results of those first three methods should do so."

Peirce claims that this coincidence with fact is achievable through science as a result of what he calls its "fundamental hypothesis," which can be paraphrased as follows: "There are Real things, whose characters are

entirely independent of our opinions about them; those Reals affect our senses according to regular laws and, . . . by taking advantages of the laws of perception, we can ascertain by reason how things really and truly are; and . . . be led to the one True conclusion."

In other words, according to Peirce, science depends on a correspondence theory of truth: there is already, prior to our investigation, some existing truth, about which our conclusions can then either be wrong or right. "The new conception involved here," he writes, "is that of Reality." For Peirce, it would seem that a belief which is obtained through one of the first three methods cannot be classed as knowledge, while one based on science can – that we have at least some grounds for connecting a scientific conclusion to an independently existing 'external world.'

In defending his supposition of an external world against the skeptical position, Peirce suggests that there is a tacit acknowledgment of a correspondence version of truth implicit in the skeptic's doubt. The fact that this doubt produces dissatisfaction, Peirce claims, is an indication that the doubter believes "that there is some one thing which a proposition should represent." In other words, if there is not an external truth for a belief to correspond to, then there is no reason to be unsatisfied with an unjustified belief in the first place. Thus the skeptic's very act of doubting an external world would suggest that they believe that there is one.

In the end, however, Peirce leaves the skeptics' central question basically unanswered, simply asserting that it is not worth the effort of addressing fully: "[N]ot having any doubt, nor believing that anybody else whom I could influence has, it would be the merest babble for me to say more about it." Rather than confronting the skeptics on their own terms, Peirce dismisses their basic project – questioning the possibility of knowledge production – as useless. Since doubt causes dissatisfaction, and all humans wish to rid themselves of it, the skeptic may express reservations about the validity of this endeavor, but it will nonetheless take place. For Peirce, the important question is not 'can we' or 'should we' fix our beliefs, but rather 'how should we go about doing so.' With this in mind, Peirce examines the means which are available to us, and fixes on science – with its hypothesis of an external world included as part of the package – as the most satisfactory and rigorous of the available methods.

In his essay 'Epistemological Realism,' Michael Williams chooses a different route to attack the skeptical position. Instead of moving beyond the skeptical position by rejecting it as impractical, Williams examines the foundations of the skeptics' questions. According to Williams, what the skeptical position asks for is an explanation of knowledge which satisfies two conditions: the totality condition and the objectivity condition. The totality condition requires that a satisfactory explanation of knowledge must adequately justify all knowledge. This, Williams argues, would require that some form of

knowledge be 'epistemologically prior' to our experience of the world, so that we might use this prior knowledge to evaluate our supposed experiential knowledge and decide whether or not it passes the test. The objectivity condition, on the other hand, requires "that the knowledge we want to explain is knowledge of an objective world, a world that is the way it is independently of how it appears to us to be or what we are inclined to believe about it."

If we compare Williams' analysis of the skeptics' demands to Peirce's account of knowledge, we begin to see some flaws in Peirce's handling of the skeptical position. Peirce's argument that the dissatisfaction of doubt is evidence of the skeptics' belief in external truth seems to handle the totality condition by indicating that some 'epistemologically prior' knowledge leads us to believe in an external world. His 'external permanency,' on the other hand, deals with the 'objectivity condition,' and it is here we see an apparent incompatibility between Williams and Peirce. Peirce's hypothesis asserts that 'real' things "affect our senses according to regular laws, and. . .by taking advantage of the laws of perception, we can ascertain by reasoning how things really and truly are." Williams, on the other hand, cautions us that such assumptions of "connections between experiential data and worldly fact" will not truly rid us of the skeptical position: "[I]f, in a desperate attempt to avoid skepticism, we insist on such connections, we make the way the world is depend on how it appears to us, in violation of the objectivity requirement."

Williams does not, however, conclude that the skeptic is correct, but goes on to undermine the assumptions on which it rests by exposing the conceptual baggage of the 'totality condition.' This condition, Williams argues, assumes that all knowledge is somehow fundamentally related, and that the class or category of things we refer to as knowledge is a meaningful object of theoretical exploration in its own right. Rather than accepting this assumption that all knowledge is in some way homogeneous, Williams points out the diversity and complexity of the different ideas and beliefs which are commonly referred to as knowledge. He thus refutes the idea that certain kinds of knowledge have corresponding epistemological properties which can give them priority over other kinds, regardless of situation or context. It is this very context, Williams argues, which defines what does and does not qualify as knowledge.

Thus Williams does away entirely with the need to prove an external world. Our knowledge of 'things outside of us' is perfectly justified in the context in which it normally occurs. All that I need to know about a chair in order to sit down in it is contained in my knowledge that 'that is a chair.' Asking whether I really know that it is a chair, under the conditions of totality and objectivity, is simply removing that item of knowledge from the commonsense context in which it has meaning.

This context dependency, however, may lead us to a conclusion just as unsettling as the skeptical uncertainty we sought to escape in the first place. If all knowledge is

dependent on its context, this seems incompatible with a correspondence theory of truth. How can the same belief match an external truth in one context, but not in another, or the same external truth match up with two conflicting beliefs in two different situations? It would seem that contextualism must abandon the correspondence theory entirely. This, however, introduces the possibility of a relativism which allows almost anything to function as 'truth' in some contexts – a disturbing prospect for those, like Peirce, who would like their beliefs to "coincide with fact."

However, there may yet be a way to salvage Peirce's 'external permanency' in a way that is consistent with Williams' rejection of epistemological foundationalism. In describing this external permanency on which scientific knowledge is to be grounded, how 'external' does Peirce require it to be? In rejecting the claims of mystics to have access to an external source of truth, Peirce writes: "our external permanency would not be external, in our sense, if it was restricted in its influence to one individual. It must be something which affects, or might affect, every man." This permanency, then, is not necessarily the same as the 'external world' that the skeptic demands proof of. Rather, it is a 'permanency' that is grounded in the experiences of humanity. By thus restricting the 'truth' with which our knowledge should correspond, we can provide a specific context within which our beliefs can function as knowledge. It is by checking our individual beliefs and experiences against this larger context that we can assign our beliefs the status of knowledge.

This adds an element of a 'coherence' theory of truth to Peirce's hypothesis. The 'truth' to which our beliefs correspond need not be completely external, but rather can be judged by how well it 'coheres' or fits in with an existing framework of beliefs – one composed, not merely of one individual's subjective experiences, but rather of the combined experiences of humanity as whole. While this combined subjectivity may not be properly 'objective' as such, or as 'permanent' as Peirce might wish, it nevertheless provides individual believers with something external against which to check their beliefs.

With this contextual framework now in place, we can disregard the skeptics' question – how is it the case that we can have knowledge – and move on to what Peirce found more interesting: how shall we go about getting it. If the skeptical request for proof of an 'external world' refers to a world that is external not only to the individual, but to all humanity, then it is difficult to see how anything so external could affect our beliefs about the human context in any case. Thus the skeptics' questions can remain unanswered – for us, the answers become irrelevant.

Works Cited

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