Three responses to scepticism

This handout follows the handout on ‘The nature of the sceptic’s challenge’. You should read that handout first.

MITIGATED SCEPTICISM

The term ‘mitigated’ scepticism comes from Hume’s An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding, §XII, Part 3. Sceptical arguments, Hume thinks, either derive from ‘popular’ objections or from ‘philosophical’ ones. The argument from illusion and Plato’s argument from disagreement are examples of the former; the arguments from sense-data and the brain in a vat are examples of the latter. When it comes to the question of the existence of an external, physical world, says Hume, ‘the profounder and more philosophical sceptics will always triumph’ (Enquiry, 202).

Hume calls this kind of scepticism, the kind we have been discussing, ‘excessive’ scepticism or Pyrrhonism. (Pyrrhonism was a school of ancient Greek philosophy, that argued we should suspend all judgment because we cannot establish the truth.) This view holds that we should give up our beliefs, since they cannot be rationally justified. Hume asks what the meaning or point of such scepticism is, as it can have no permanent effect on how we live our lives.

Hume contrasts ‘excessive’ scepticism with two forms of ‘mitigated’ scepticism, that can result from correcting excessive scepticism using common sense. The first form involves a change in how we hold our beliefs. It opposes dogmatic certainty, inspires modesty and caution, and attacks pride, prejudice, and disdain for people who disagree with us. Philosophy shows that the basis of our beliefs in reason is insecure.

The second form of mitigated scepticism draws the conclusion that there are certain subjects that we cannot coherently enquire about. Reasoning can legitimately inform us about mathematics and particular matters of fact, existence and causation, that can be established by experience. But metaphysical enquiries, including the attempt to show the external exists (or does not) are impossible, while matters of religion are best founded on faith and revelation, not reason.

Discussion

We can object that Hume’s first form of ‘mitigated scepticism’ is simply a collection of intellectual virtues. We should adopt it, but we don’t need sceptical arguments to support it.

In the second form, Hume grants that we cannot have knowledge, i.e. knowledge justified by reason, of the existence of the external world. But this does not entail, for Hume, that I cannot know that I have two hands. Our mental faculties are fine for establishing answers to the second, empirical question; but not for investigating the first, philosophical question. But the (‘excessive’) sceptic argued that if we do not know the
answer to the philosophical question, about the existence of the external world, then we
do not know the answer to the empirical question.

Hume can reject this on two grounds. First, we can have knowledge where we can obtain
answers that can make a practical difference to our lives. Empirical knowledge is of this
kind. Second, while scepticism shows that we cannot know there is an external world, the
sceptical inference about empirical knowledge is something we can't know. We also can't
show that if we can't know there is an external world, we can't have any empirical
knowledge. Scepticism is itself part of an enquiry that we cannot engage in.

Hume’s mitigated scepticism is based on his conceding that the philosophical arguments
of ‘excessive’ scepticism cannot be answered. But is this right? If sceptical arguments can
be answered, then we have no reason to accept mitigated scepticism, and its narrow view
of what human beings can enquire into.

THE VIEW THAT THE STARTING POINT FOR SCEPTICAL ARGUMENTS IS UNINTELLIGIBLE

On dreaming
One response to Descartes’ argument from dreaming is to say that it literally makes no
sense. The concept of a dream depends upon a concept of reality that it contrasts with. If
everything were a dream, we wouldn’t be able to have the concepts of dreaming and
reality.

The objection is inconclusive. First, we might argue that even in a dream, we can dream
that we wake up, but we are still asleep. Perhaps the development of our concepts of
‘dream’ and ‘reality’ are analogous: they refer to a difference within our experience, but
this doesn’t show that the whole of our experience can’t be disconnected from reality in
the way that we think dreams are. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the objection
misunderstands scepticism. Descartes does not need to say ‘perhaps everything is a
dream’; he only needs to argue that we cannot know when we are dreaming and when we
are awake. This would allow us to develop concepts of dreaming and reality on the basis
of our different experiences; but the correct application of those concepts isn’t secure.

Gilbert Ryle
Gilbert Ryle argues that the very idea of ‘error’ presupposes that we sometimes ‘get it
right’, for ‘error’ and ‘correctness’ are complementary concepts, like ‘genuine’ and ‘false’.
Without correctness, the idea of error makes no sense, just as counterfeit coins are
impossible without real coins.

However, this fails in two ways. First, the sceptic seeks to challenge our belief that we
know we’ve got it right when we have, not the very idea of ‘getting it right’. And second,
the fact that we need the idea of getting it right to make sense of error doesn’t entail that
we do ever actually get it right. Compare perfection and imperfection. We need the idea
of perfection to make sense of imperfection. But that doesn’t mean that anything, ever,
needs to be perfect.

Ordinary language
We might argue that what ‘knowledge’ and ‘know’ mean is given by how we usually use
the terms. The sceptic’s claim that, say, I don’t know I’m reading this page, makes no
sense. It is precisely cases like this through which we learn what ‘know’ means at all.
However, the sceptic’s challenge is to point out that even in such paradigmatic cases of ‘knowledge’, we may be making an unjustified assumption, viz. that appearance is a good guide to reality.

**Wittgenstein**

Wittgenstein developed a more sophisticated version of the ordinary language approach. The sceptic is wrong in thinking we doubt claims like ‘there is an external world’. If there is not way of answering the question ‘how do you know?’, the question itself makes no sense. ‘The external world exists’, and other fundamental beliefs or ‘background assumptions’, are not things we can either doubt or know. We are certain of these ‘background assumptions’, but it is a mistake to say ‘I know this is a hand’ in the contexts which the sceptic is talking about (it makes sense on an archaeological dig!). Knowledge claims require grounds; and to know something is to be able to establish it. But how can we establish ‘This is a hand’? What evidence is there we can appeal to? What checks are possible?

This doesn’t mean scepticism is right. Background assumptions are used to teach the meaning of words. But the sceptic’s situation of doubt is similar to the circumstances under which I learnt ‘hand’. So ‘If I wanted to doubt whether this was my hand, how could I avoid doubting whether the word ‘hand’ has any meaning?’ *(On Certainty, §369)*

But if I doubt the meanings of the words I use, I can’t put into words what it is I’m doubting. We can argue, then, that sceptical doubts are literally meaningless. They deprive the very words used to formulate the doubt of any meaning. Our background assumptions underpin the meanings of our words.

But Wittgenstein’s solution is hard to accept. First, he claims that we do not know such statements as ‘This is a hand’. Second, he says these statements do not even describe reality, because they provide examples of what words mean: “I know this is a hand.”--And what is a hand?--’Well, this, for example.” The circularity is clear. If ‘this’ is a hand by definition, saying that ‘this is a hand’ is not to describe anything. It is more similar to asserting an analytic truth, such as ‘Bachelors are unmarried’. Analytic truths help define the meanings of the terms used. Our background assumptions likewise help define the meanings of the words we use. They therefore can’t be said to describe the world.

But many of the examples Wittgenstein gives of ‘background assumptions’, and which he says we cannot know, don’t seem to be anything like analytic statements, e.g. ‘the world existed before my birth’. And what about ‘appearance is a good guide to reality’? While Wittgenstein’s remarks on knowledge, doubt and justification are insightful, his proposal about ‘background assumptions’ leaves us puzzled.

**TRANSCENDENTAL ARGUMENTS**

Transcendental arguments are arguments about what must be true for it to be possible for us to have the kind of experience we have. For example, our experience of the physical world is structured and intelligible; our experience is of physical objects existing independently of our minds in space and time. How is this possible?

An argument from Kant tries to answer this question *(Critique of Pure Reason)*. Try to imagine what it would be like to have sense experience but with no ability to think about it. Thinking about sense experience requires concepts – at the most basic level, being
able to distinguish what comes from the different senses (vision, hearing, etc.), and then being able to distinguish types of properties, e.g. colour from shape. If we couldn’t think about sensory experience, it would be completely unintelligible, no more than a confused ‘buzz’. For instance, and very importantly, we couldn’t tell that we were experiencing anything – i.e. objects. The idea of an object is the idea of something that is unified in some way - a colour, shape, position, and so on, going together; or even more fundamentally, something that exists in space and time.

A ‘buzz’ doesn’t deserve the name ‘experience’. Experience is experience of – experience of objects, that stand in organized relations (in space and time) to each other. So experience has a certain ‘object’-ive structure. Kant argued that such intelligible experience presupposes and requires certain, very basic concepts, which he called categories. The structure of experience is made possible by certain key concepts which contribute to the ideas of an ‘object’ and of an objective world, including CAUSALITY, SUBSTANCE, UNITY and so on. These concepts can’t be derived from experience, because they are what make experience possible in the first place. So they are a priori; Kant says they are part of the nature of the mind.

Scepticism suggests that the way we experience or conceptualise the world could be completely different from how the world is. Kant argues that the ‘object’-ive nature of experience is a reflection of the nature of the mind. So our experience of and our thoughts about everyday objects – tables, plants, and so – is not a straightforward presentation of what exists completely independently of the mind (what Kant calls ‘things-in-themselves’). The idea of an object doesn’t reflect the world, it reflects the mind. So everyday objects are defined by our structured experience of them.

This provides an answer to scepticism. What we mean by the physical world is defined, in part, by our a priori concepts. We can know that the physical world exists and is objective, i.e. that there are physical objects existing in space that correspond to our sensory experiences of them, because the world as we experience it is structured by our a priori concepts. Because how things are is given by these concepts, so there is no question of a gap between our minds and how things are. This doesn’t mean that the world of experience – the world of objects – isn’t real. It is by definition ‘objective’.

However, Kant’s argument has a consequence which some might think is sceptical. We can ask: what is the relation between the physical world (structured by the categories) and how reality is completely independently of our minds (independent of the categories)? Kant’s reply is that we cannot know; in fact, we cannot even coherently think about it.

But this is not the triumph of scepticism, because there is no meaningful way in which we could know about reality in this sense. If Kant had argued just that our experience is a certain way, we could object that our concepts were a limitation to our knowledge – we weren’t able to experience the world as it really is. But Kant has argued that our experience must be the way it is – there is no alternative to experiencing the world as a world of objects, so there is no alternative way of experiencing ‘the world as it is’. Any alternative wouldn’t be ‘experience’ at all. This makes our experience properly objective, the basis of knowledge of how things are. What we don’t know – how the world is completely independently of our minds – is what it is impossible to know. So there is nothing here we could know but don’t.
Knowing what we think
A quite different transcendental argument against brain-in-a-vat scepticism is presented by Hilary Putnam ('Brains in a Vat'). Scepticism requires that words mean what they do in order to formulate the scenarios which challenge our normal justifications. Many words get their meaning, in part, from causal connections to the world; ‘water’ only successfully refers to water because the thoughts and sentences involving the word are causally connected to water itself. The same is true of ‘brain’ and ‘vat’. However, if I am a brain in a vat, then all my experiences are caused by the computer, and all my thoughts and ‘sentences’ will refer to images created by the computer. So if I am a brain in a vat, ‘brain’ to me means ‘brain-in-the-image’. I cannot, in fact, think about or refer to real brains; I can only think about computer-generated simulacra of brains. But according to the sceptical scenario, I am supposed to be wondering whether I am a brain in a vat. If I am a brain in a vat, I cannot have this thought. I can only wonder whether I am a ‘brain-in-the-image’ in a ‘vat-in-the-image’! If I can wonder whether I a brain in a vat, if this is the meaning of my thought, then I am not a brain in a vat.