

PHL B20 Lecture notes
Topic 5: Skeptics

** Some skeptics:

* The readings contain arguments for a lot of different skeptical conclusions. Skeptics say 'we don't know whether P'. They don't *deny* that P: they are not people who are certain that not-P. Skeptics are uncertain: for a skeptic it might be that P and it might be that not-P.

* Skepticism is not peculiar to philosophy:

> All of us are skeptics about a lot of things. Is there life elsewhere in the universe? Are there an even number of trees? No one knows.

> We can also differ in our level of skepticism about this or that question. Was Mo at the party? Yes. Did you guys talk? No, I just saw Mo across the room. I dunno, I heard Ro was there, and Ro looks like Mo, and rumor has it that Mo might have been hanging out in the park that night. Here the second person is a skeptic about whether Mo was at the party.

> Defense attorneys are professional skeptics: did Fred commit the murder? There is a reasonable level of 'doubt' or uncertainty about the matter: a reasonable person could say 'maybe he did, maybe he didn't'.

> Scientists try to maintain a skeptical attitude: you are certain that your hypothesis is established by your experiment but -- as it happened -- you overlooked the influence of the cell phone tower next door.

* Still, the skeptics that philosophers have been interested in are uncertain about more radical and surprising matters.

> Skepticism about basic sense-perceptual knowledge is the big famous one: you think that there is a table in front of you, going by looking; but actually your sense-perception does not prove that there is, because you might be dreaming/in the matrix/deluded by an evil genius. This is Descartes.

> Skepticism about local sense-perceptual knowledge: you think that stuff more than twenty feet away is so-and-so, going by looking; but you might be in a bubble world. Or: you think that stuff on the right is so-and-so, going by looking; but you might be in a split world.

> Skepticism about stuff behind you: you think that there are no leprechauns, but actually they are really good at staying out of sight.

> Skepticism about the contents of your closet: you think there are no monsters in there, but maybe tonight is the night!

> Skepticism about the past: you think that yesterday you did XYZ, going by your memories: but your memories do not prove this, because it might be that the world was created ex nihilo this morning complete with delusive memories. (Bertrand Russell)

> Skepticism about enumerative induction based on invalidity: you think that because the sun has risen every day that it will rise tomorrow. But this doesn't prove that it will because we can certainly make sense of the idea that the sun rises every day for a long period and then one day suddenly stops. This is Hume. [Recall that an argument P_1, P_2, \dots therefore Q is "invalid" just if it is possible for P_1, P_2 , etc to be true while Q is false.]

> Skepticism about enumerative induction based on categories: you think that because the sun has risen every day that it will rise tomorrow. Well the following is consistent with your data: the sun has risen every day up to today; all EI shows is that the sun will rise on any day that is earlier than tomorrow. What is so special about the category of *absolutely every day* as contrasted with *absolutely every day that is

earlier than tomorrow*? This is Goodman.

> Skepticism about IBE based on invalidity: you think that because the noises in the wall are best explained by the mice, that there are mice in the wall. Just because that is the best explanation leaves open that it's the CIA's fault. How can you be so certain?

> Skepticism about IBE based on subjectivity: you think that because the noises in the wall are best explained by the mice, that there are mice in the wall. But that's just *your* taste in explanation. Surely we could imagine a guy who thinks the CIA is a better explanation. How can you be sure that his picture of the world isn't the right one?

> Skepticism about the future based on probabilities: you think that you won't go on safari next year because you won't be able to afford it. But you have this lottery ticket. There is some probability it will win. So how can you be so certain that you won't be able to afford the safari? Alternatively: you think that just because you have never seen a podium turn into a moose that this podium won't turn into a moose in the next five minutes. But quantum mechanics says that there is some probability that it will. So how can you be so certain that it won't? That's Hawthorne

> Skepticism about logic based on subjectivity: you think that just because P that you must flat-out reject that not-P, and you think this because your logic is against contradictions. But Graham Priest rejects this logic: he thinks that sometimes both P and not-P. He's a smart guy. How can you be so certain that his picture of the world isn't the right one?

There is a pattern emerging ...

** How to get talked out of your belief:

S1: In your view, H is the case. But what reason do you have for believing that?

U: Because E.

S2: Well, it is coherent to suppose both E and not H, right? That would happen if Z, right?

U: Yes.

S3: So you are ignoring the possibility of Z.

U: Well I was ...

S4: Do you think that is an OK thing to do?

U: Well it seemed like it at the time but not anymore.

S5: OK, so what reason do you have for believing not-Z?

U: I don't have one.

S6: So you are not certain that not-Z?

U: I guess not.

S7: So it might be that E and not-H?

U: I guess so.

S8: So you don't believe that H after all.

U: I guess not.

S9: Now don't stop not believing.

U: OK.

S10: Now you're a skeptic too!

**** Comments on the general form of skepticism:**

1. There is no significant structural difference among any of our arguments. They all fit this very same pattern. It is pretty hard to say 'here is a big disconnect in subject-matter that makes this or that answer the single sole acceptable approach to skepticism about this subject-matter'. A lot of philosophers have tried to make this sort of manoeuvre -- Kant referred to the failure to block Descartes's worries as 'the scandal of philosophy' -- but in my view that looks pretty unprincipled.

Indeed, we could even imagine a 'little-by-little' argument: if we can't be skeptics about the whole world, then we can't be skeptics about the world more than 1mm away; and then we can't be skeptics about the world more than 2mm away; etc. So we can't ever legitimately get rid of any beliefs we start out with!

2. This argumentation is not really about *knowledge* per se. The aim of the skeptic is not solely to show that we do not know something, or to show that we should stop calling something 'knoweldge'. Indeed, our little dialogue does not talk about knowledge. Instead it is a back-and-forth in which U has attention called to possibilities that are coherent but had been ignored, as a result comes to recognize that certain opinions are without reasoned support, and as a result abandons certain opinions.

3. Nor is it about language or even really dialogue. This sort of exercise is one that one could very easily go through in the privacy of one's own mind.

4. Perhaps there are subjects who would be immune to this sort of dialogue. One possibility is that certain claims are always rightly believed just if they are true. The 'raw data' of sensations or phenomenal properties might be this way. Then if we had someone who only believed these sorts of claims and adjusted the rest of their probabilities by conditionalization they might be in the clear.

However: our posterior credences depend on our prior credences. And as we saw with 'grue' there are many different ways to have prior credences. We saw that grueish skepticism is a way to challenge people's prior credences. I might wonder how to justify this particular set of prior credences in light of this sort of skeptic.

This suggests that skepticism is not really even about *beliefs* but about maintaining any particular epistemic attitude at all.

5. How can U avoid complete epistemic helplessness?

At S1, U could *refuse to engage* ('go away, I'm busy') or *assert the right to groundless belief* ('I dunno, that's just how I look at things')

At S2, U could *fail to find Z coherent* ('That's absurd')

At S4, U could *assert the right to ignore Z* ('Yeah well maybe that *could* happen but who cares')

At S5, U could *provide a reason to disbelieve Z* ('OK, look: that isn't how things are because F')

At S6, U could *disengage* ('whatever with you') or *assert the right to groundless belief* ('I dunno, that's just how I see things')

At S9, U could *eventually start ignoring Z again* ('going about my business: now H, so ...')

S3, S7, and S8 are 'logical' steps that draw direct conclusions about certainty and belief.

** Similarities to the stuff on IBE and the barrel roll

Skeptic asks us to *expand the set of possibilities we take seriously*

IBE is a way to *contract the set of possibilities we take seriously*

The pre-IBE guy and the skeptic both *see coherent possibilities that the competition is ignoring*

We could think of the skeptic as highlighting these possibilities through vivid description, the pre-IBE self as highlighting them through insurance purchasing practices, and as preserving them through not selling the insurance policy.

In a way both the pre-IBE guy and the skeptic are playing off an internal incoherence in our epistemic lives: both of them note that there are possibilities we ignore that we consider coherent and compatible all things considered with our evidence. Ignoring something doesn't make it go away though. Since it remains there latently, there is a sense in which we are incoherent: in which we, as Lewis puts it, assign different values to one and the same bet.

Moral: whenever we perform IBE, or are potentially persuaded by a skeptic, this shows that we are ignoring certain possibilities that we still, at some level, take seriously. This is a kind of incoherence. Since this happens pervasively, our incoherence is pervasive.