

Challenging misunderstandings of scepticism

Abstract: It is argued that (global, philosophical) scepticism has been widely misinterpreted as a threat to justification in general, when it offers a threat only to the justification of absolute claims. This position is argued only on the basis of the philosophical nature of sceptical arguments themselves. Attempts to refute sceptical argument have generally misinterpreted it by conflating the mere recognition of uncertainty (a position requiring a psychological description) with negative assertion. Sceptical arguments cannot involve negative claims, nor can they be treated selectively, if they are to be compatible with the grounds of doubt they offer. Yet at the same time, incremental claims are compatible with sceptical doubt. Fully global scepticism thus cannot be 'extreme', but on the contrary has a beneficial and moderating effect on belief.

In this paper I want to question a long tradition of the misinterpretation of scepticism in Western philosophy. Based only on the implications of sceptical arguments themselves, rather than on historical evidence or the unnecessary assumptions made when scepticism is interpreted as a threat, I want to put the case for (full-blooded, global, philosophical) scepticism as a benign and much misunderstood movement. My main contentions will be as follows:

- Sceptical arguments merely point out uncertainty. They are a threat only to absolute beliefs, not to incremental ones that are compatible with uncertainty.
- Sceptical arguments do not involve negative assertion of the kind that has been mistakenly (and unnecessarily) challenged by Descartes, Hume, Wittgenstein,

and many others. Rather sceptical arguments must, by implication, undermine absolute negative assertions as much as positive ones.

- There can be no such thing as 'extreme scepticism'. Global scepticism can be applied consistently or inconsistently. It is *selective* scepticism that is unjustified due to its failure to apply scepticism even-handedly. So-called 'mitigated' or 'local' scepticism is merely selective.

My approach will be first to summarise a range of sceptical arguments, then to survey the failure to successfully refute scepticism. Finally I will put forward the basis of the above conclusions, drawing on this material.

Summary of sceptical arguments

The following arguments come from a variety of sources from Pyrrho onwards.

However, their sources are not significant to my argument – only the fact that such arguments can be made.

1. **The ten modes of Pyrrhonism** (first given by Aenesidemus: Sextus Empiricus 1996) give a range of reasons why our senses do not necessarily give us correct information about objects. These are
 - a. that different animals have different sense organs, so therefore animals perceive objects differently from humans
 - b. that different humans have different sense abilities (e.g. some have visual impairments) and thus perceive objects differently
 - c. that different senses perceive objects differently (e.g. I may be able to hear something I cannot see)

- d. that differences in circumstances lead to different perceptions (e.g. a hand put in hot water and then cold will find the cold colder through contrast)
- e. that differences in spatial position relative to an observed object (e.g. a distant landmark) lead to different perceptions and to perceptions that may be mistaken
- f. that our perceptions of an object will be altered by what we see it with or near, which may lead us to see it differently (e.g. camouflage)
- g. that the same object will vary in the way it is perceived when in different quantities or when composed differently, making it impossible to identify the object with certainty (e.g. wheat grains look different from flour, but are composed of the same substance)
- h. that if objects are claimed to be absolutely existent this claim is still only understood relative to other claims
- i. that the constancy or rarity with which something appears changes our perception of it (e.g. comets are rarer, and thus seeing one is more significant to us, than stars)
- j. that moral claims also differ between people (one person's good child is another's bad).

In general, then, these arguments point out that all our perceptions are relative, because influenced both by the specific circumstances of our perception and of the object we are (or may be) perceiving. This means that any perception may be in error.

2. **The dream argument** considered by Descartes (1641/1912) and others, suggests that we cannot tell with certainty that we are not dreaming (or that our

whole experience is not otherwise illusory) at a given moment, and therefore that our perceptions are not completely erroneous. This argument is problematic if applied to all our experience through time, as it then deprives us of any contrast between 'dream' and 'reality', but we could consistently maintain this distinction to assert that at least some of our past experience must not have been a dream, and yet not be certain that our current experience is not. The 'brain in a vat' is another version of this argument.

3. **The error argument** points out that even if our whole experience at a given time is not erroneous, particular objects that we think we perceive may still be so. Past mistakes in perception show that mistakes are possible, and we were not aware of those mistakes at the time we made them, so we may not be aware of our current mistakes. This argument can be applied to current perceptions and also to memory, to point out that with a past perception we may have made a mistake in the original perception or in our memory of that perception.
4. **The time lapse argument** used by Bertrand Russell (1940, 13) suggests that we cannot be certain of the object of perception because the conditions of that object may have changed by the time we receive the perception (e.g. the sun may have ceased to exist 7 minutes ago, but due to the distance from the sun and the time it takes light to traverse that distance, we wouldn't know about it yet).
5. **The relativity of cultural background.** Earlier sceptical arguments acknowledged all the physical reasons for the relativity of perception, but more recent psychological and linguistic research tells us more about the mental

reasons. Our cultural background may lead us to perceive objects differently: for example, perceivers of the Müller-Lyer Illusion make a bigger misjudgement about the relative lengths of the lines if they are accustomed to environments with rectilinear architecture (Segall et al 1963, 769-771).

6. **Problem of Induction.** All generalisations based on specific observations lack certainty, because the observations do not provide enough evidence to cover the possibly infinite number of instances referred to in the generalisation. For example, if I claim that all physical objects have mass and are subject to gravity, I have not checked all the physical objects in the universe to ensure this.

7. **The infinite regress of justification.** There is no possible claim for which one could not ask for further justification (i.e. there are no self-evident claims). However, if a justification is offered, one could then ask for a justification of the justification, and so on ad infinitum. This argument works not only for empirical claims but also for a priori ones.

8. **The relativity of linguistic categories.** Even if we were able to overcome the above sceptical arguments in other respects, the language out of which we represent claims about objects in the universe does not have an absolute relationship with the objects themselves, either as they may exist in themselves or even as we experience them. We cannot be certain either that another person understands the same as we do by a particular proposition about the world, or even that we mean the same ourselves when we return to our previous utterances after an interval of time. Even if we were to weaken the requirement to

one of identical representation of our experiences to ourselves after a few seconds, we cannot be sure that our mental representation of that experience has not changed, and thus that the language does not mean something different from what it meant to us beforehand. Claims of certainty depend on the absolute consistency of language used to represent those claims, otherwise any certainty that might apply to a statement at one instant will immediately be lost at the next instant, even for the person who made the statement.

9. **The vagueness of linguistic categories.** Any possible representational term out of which a claim of certainty might be made is also inadequate for the representation of any reality (or even any experience) because of its vague relationship to that reality or experience. The terms used for representing objects (even abstract ones) are nouns, and any given noun is vague in terms of the scope of what it represents either in experience or the object of experience. For example, if I use the word 'pen' to describe an object, and even if I give a precise and unique description of that pen, giving measurements and physical coordinates, what I am referring to is vague both in terms of space (some molecules or even smaller particles may not be clearly defined as part of the pen or not) and time (any interval of time I may specify for my statement about the pen will have duration, and during that duration the pen may change). If, on the other hand, I make no claims for the object which take up any space or time, my claims will be uninformative. It might be claimed that *a priori* claims such as those about numbers avoid this vagueness, but when applied to any claim about the universe these numbers depend on counting and measurement, which are unavoidably vague.

Numbers 1-5 apply to any empirical claim. Number 6 applies to any empirical generalisation. Numbers 7-9, however, apply to any proposition whatsoever, including *a priori* claims.

Together these sceptical arguments provide a huge over-determination of the sceptical case. We do not need them all. Only one of them has to be successful (in relation to the categories of claim it applies to) to prove that there can be no certainty attached to any claim. These arguments seem to me irrefutable. However, to establish this more fully I will now survey some of the unsuccessful attempts at refutation.

The failure of philosophical arguments against scepticism

Philosophical arguments against scepticism have come in broadly five types, as far as I can identify:

- 1) The assertion of self-evident truths (e.g. Descartes)
- 2) Arguments that scepticism is practically unsustainable, and thus that dogmatism is unavoidable (e.g. Hume)
- 3) Arguments that scepticism involves practical inconsistencies or a 'paradox of scepticism' (e.g. Burnyeat, Nussbaum)
- 4) Arguments that scepticism is unjustified because it only offers negative grounds of judgement (e.g. Moore and other positivists)
- 5) Arguments that scepticism makes invalid semantic assumptions (e.g. Wittgenstein)

I shall argue here that each of these lines of criticism itself involves assumptions that we do not necessarily need to make in approaching the subject.

1. The assertion of self-evident truths

If self-evident truths exist then this would obviously undermine scepticism, as there would be a foundational certainty from which other certainties might then be deduced. Descartes' *cogito*, in which the certainty of the thinker's existence is deduced from the experience of a thought, is the classic example of a self-evident truth (Descartes 1912).

Let us accept for the sake of argument that there might be self-evident truths such as that I, a thinker, exist at this instant. Since it is not empirical, this claim avoids the first six sceptical arguments listed above, and it avoids the seventh, the infinite regress, if its foundational claims are justified. However, this claim and any other foundational claim are still subject to the last two sceptical arguments that point out the relativity and vagueness of linguistic categories. "I, a thinker, exist at this moment" is relative to each thinker because it can only be interpreted according to the linguistic understanding of each individual thinker. If you tell me that you exist at this moment, to me that obviously means that *you* exist at this moment, which means something rather different from *me* existing at this moment. Unless this statement has an absolute unchanging meaning for all who may comprehend it – which it clearly does not – it can hardly have an absolute unchanging justification. The same point would apply to mathematical or logical claims.

The ambiguity of statements supposedly offering self-evident truths also creates contradictions in the very claims involved. “I, a thinker, exist at this moment” for example, either means that a thinker exists over a short period of time, or at a genuine instant of time with no duration. If the former, the thinker can have thoughts (which always take up a certain amount of time), but by the time the thinker gets to the end of her thoughts, she may be different from when she started them and thus no longer “exist” in the absolute, unchanging sense required. On the other hand, within an instant without any duration, no thoughts can take place and thus it seems that a thinker cannot exist.

2. Arguments that scepticism is practically unsustainable

Hume’s argument about scepticism, on the other hand, attempts to adopt a no-nonsense practical approach to it. After admitting that we cannot refute scepticism on its own terms, Hume seems to be saying that there is no way that we can, in practice, accept those terms. It is ‘nature’, he says, that drives us to belief, rather than reason, because when we engage with objects in the world around us we do so on the basis of a practical assumption of their existence and form. Scepticism is all very well in the abstraction of a study, but there is no way we can keep it up in ordinary life:

'I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hours' amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strained, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther.' (Hume 1978, 279)

Hume makes an unjustified assumption about the implications of scepticism here: indeed, he gets the whole matter the wrong way round. Scepticism casts doubt on any claims to certainty, but this does not imply that to take it seriously means that we must be constantly straining to disbelieve what we encounter in everyday experience. On the contrary, our everyday experience involves uncertainty, and scepticism, far from relying on 'cold' and 'strained' calculations, uses this everyday experience as its point of departure. It is claims of certainty, and the attempt to justify them, that go far beyond everyday experience and become cold and strained.

This point is closely related to another: namely the distinction between denial of claims and denial of certainty about them. If we were to assert the opposite of everything we take for granted in everyday life, e.g. that there is not a table in front of me, that the world does not exist etc, then this would indeed be a cold and strained exercise. However, there is no reason why we should have to interpret sceptical arguments in this way. Scepticism denies certainty, and thus leaves us in a position lacking certainty, rather than asserting the opposite of our accepted beliefs. To assert the opposite would be at least as uncertain an enterprise. Hume, however, (along with many of his successors) seems to confuse these two positions. There will be further discussion of this point below.

3. The supposed paradox of scepticism

Burnyeat and Nussbaum, on the other hand, respectively accuse scepticism of other kinds of practical inconsistency. Burnyeat claims that it's impossible to maintain the degree of detachment from one's views that scepticism demands (Burnyeat 1980). Nussbaum argues that the classical sceptics are dogmatic about the value of *ataraxia*, which in classical Pyrrhonian scepticism is the relaxed state of detachment

from opposing certainties (Nussbaum 1994). Both these objections could be seen as versions of what is sometimes called ‘the paradox of scepticism’: namely, that sceptics are certain about uncertainty. This supposed paradox can be presented either as a direct contradiction or at least as a practical inconsistency.

Both of these thinkers are commentators on the classical sceptics and make these remarks in the context of discussing classical Pyrrhonism. I am purposely avoiding too much discussion of the scholarly issues about historical schools of philosophy here, but am attempting only to isolate what we do or do not need to think about sceptical claims considered in their own right. Burnyeat’s and Nussbaum’s arguments may or may not be true of classical Pyrrhonism, but my argument is that their criticisms distract us from the useful insights that can be offered by sceptical arguments in general, regardless of their temporal context.

Like Hume, both of these objections fail to take sufficiently into account the distinction between the denial of claims and the denial of certainty about claims. If we assert the opposite of a given claim, we raise the same issues of certainty about it as with the original claim. If we merely deny the certainty surrounding a claim, however, we modify the way in which that claim may be held rather than setting up a new claim. If we understand the modification of the way we hold a claim in *psychological* terms, rather than merely in terms of opposing propositions, this becomes clearer. A claim not held with certainty is held in a more provisional and a more relaxed fashion, which may also affect our subsequent judgements about how to assess it. Contrary to Nussbaum’s assumptions, the value of such a provisional state is not one that we have to accept absolutely and all at once in the form of an idealised state of *ataraxia*, but can be a matter of incremental recognition.

Burnyeat overestimates the degree of detachment required to take scepticism seriously, because he shares the confusion between denial and provisionality with many modern commentators. We do not need the amount of detachment that would be required to seriously adopt a position of denying all our beliefs in order to merely hold them provisionally. Nor does it require a certain fixed amount of detachment in order even to hold them provisionally. If we think about provisionality in an incremental rather than an absolute way then we can think of the process of giving up attachment to certainty as a gradual and dynamic one. This process then becomes practically achievable in a way that a sudden demand for massive detachment would not.

The supposed 'paradox of scepticism' thus involves an absolutisation of the sceptical position that scepticism itself challenges. It is a straw man – perhaps not in relation to historical scepticism, but in relation to the necessary implications of sceptical argument. Given the way in which scepticism appeals only to practical judgements and challenges all idealisation and abstraction, for scepticism itself to be accused of impracticality involves a reversal that can only be described as deeply ironic.

4. Rejection of negative grounds of judgement

Another, positivist type of response to scepticism is to assert that only positive justifications for belief are acceptable, and that negative doubts about a claim not accompanied by definite evidence against the claim are inadmissible (e.g. Ayer 1956). The logical positivists and their allies in the early twentieth century saw this as a way of protecting evidence-based scientific investigation against the encroachments of metaphysics. Those who deny commonly accepted empirical beliefs, after all, often do so only on the basis of speculation.

Much as I sympathise with the logical positivist attempt to distinguish metaphysics from claims that can be justified through experience (which I will discuss further below), the positivist route does not succeed in doing this. Positivism prevents us from taking negative doubts seriously, and simultaneously makes its own metaphysical assumptions unassailable. We need negative doubts in order to be able to consider conventionally accepted beliefs from an adequately critical perspective. The positivist dismissal of negative doubt leaves us dependent upon conventional beliefs and unable to break out of the set of assumptions that are currently accepted in our context. Logical positivism, and its successors in analytic philosophy, remain dependent on analysis of conventional positions or commonly shared intuitions, and unable to reach a justified critical standpoint beyond those conventional positions. It leaves us defenceless against confirmation bias.

Like many of the previous criticisms, too, positivism confuses denial with the mere acceptance of uncertainty. Negative doubts require us to accept the *possibility* of currently accepted beliefs being wrong, not to accept the alternative claim that they are definitely wrong. Speculative metaphysics puts forward new claims that are beyond experience – so sceptical argument is a crucial tool that should be used for combating metaphysics, not discarded at the very point when it would be most useful.

A more specific version of this positivist argument is that used by both Moore (1962) and Wittgenstein (1969) in slightly differing ways to assert the existence of their hands as a basic certainty. Their reason for dismissing scepticism about something as certain as the existence of one of their hands was not just that mere negative doubts were inadmissible, but that any evidence that could be used to support the

assertion that their hands existed would be less certain than the existence of their hands. For positivists, then, some kinds of claim have to be taken as certain and basic to all other discussions. Without those basic assumptions, it is argued, the discussion could not take place.

One of the ironic aspects of this argument is that, by using comparative certainties, it implicitly supports the sceptical rejection of absolute certainties. The ordinary language sense of 'certainty' is not the target of sceptical argument (though I would also suggest that there are other, pragmatic reasons for not over-using the ordinary language sense of 'certainty' in philosophical discussion, as it denies us useful language with which to identify and recognise philosophical uncertainty). In many ways, then, the Moore/ Wittgenstein approach to scepticism is a straw man. The sceptic does not deny that the existence of one's hand is 'certain' in an ordinary-language sense, only in an absolute sense.

Their approach can in any case only be directed against the error argument, and other sceptical arguments that raise one specific doubt whilst taking a wider context for granted. It does not apply to the dream argument, or the infinite regression argument, or the linguistic arguments. The dream argument does not require us to take one kind of fact for granted in order to cast doubt on others, only that there be some unspecified factual basis to use as a ground of contrast with a current uncertainty. Similarly, the infinite regression argument can be used against any claim of certainty whatsoever, regardless of its relationship to other claims, and the relativity and ambiguity of the linguistic composition of these claims remains regardless of its relationship to other claims. Given that only one sceptical argument

needs to stand for sceptical uncertainty as a whole to stand, Moore and Wittgenstein have failed to make any impression on it.

5. The claim of invalid semantic assumptions

Finally, Wittgenstein's objections to sceptical argument were also based on the alleged linguistic privacy of sceptical argument, and his objections to linguistic privacy in the so-called private language argument (Wittgenstein 1969 §258).

However, he was mistaken on both counts. Not only is scepticism not necessarily based on linguistic privacy (assuming that we can even make sense of the idea of linguistic privacy), but there is also no reason to assume that language developed in linguistic privacy is meaningless.

The Cartesian version of scepticism, in which I can entertain the possibility of being the only real thing in the universe, does not depend on solipsistic assertions but only on the *possibility* of solipsism (the same confusion we have already noted).

However, all the other types of sceptical argument mentioned above, including the modes of Pyrrhonism and the linguistic arguments, could just as well be applied to a publicly shared context as to a 'private' one. I might be wrong about my perceptions, but we might also be wrong about our shared perceptions, for very similar reasons.

The publicity or otherwise of the language makes no substantial difference to these kinds of arguments.

The concept of linguistic privacy, completely and absolutely distinguished from linguistic publicity, seems dubious in the first place. We use language to communicate with others, but we also use it to communicate with ourselves over time (as in Wittgenstein's example of a private diary) and perhaps even to articulate

without communicating (as when we talk to ourselves to clarify our thoughts). Wittgenstein unnecessarily assumes that the only acceptable function of language is communication. He then asserts that when using purely private language (i.e. a symbol whose significance is known only to me) in a private diary, when using it later I would have no clear criterion of meaning. However, I would have a relative criterion of meaning based on my memory of previous experience which the symbol represented. A falsely absolute distinction is made if it is assumed that the private criterion is relative whilst a public one is absolute, for there is no guarantee that a publicly used piece of language, even within a particular language game (i.e. social context where that language is shared) is not equally ambiguous.

Like the other attacks on scepticism, then, Wittgenstein's do not apply to all the arguments, and also confuse lack of certainty with definite denial. Like the other attacks, it is based on a confusion about the purpose and implications of scepticism. A complete reversal of the assumptions behind all these attacks on scepticism is required. Scepticism is not a dragon to be slain, but rather a knight in shining armour. It is certainty that is the dragon.

Scepticism, knowledge and justification

Sceptical arguments are thus irrefutable. Let us proceed on that basis. If I have omitted to discuss any objections to one or more of the sceptical arguments above, my question will be whether the objection will apply adequately to, not one of them, but all of them: an extremely unlikely eventuality.

The implication of scepticism's irrefutability is often taken to be the undermining of all knowledge. If 'knowledge' is understood in absolute rather than ordinary language

terms, this will indeed be the case. If we take the traditional definition of knowledge as justified true belief, then sceptical argument undermines both the first and the second terms. If justification is understood absolutely rather than incrementally, then sceptical argument proves that there is no absolute justification. As far as the truth condition goes, it may or may not be the case that a particular claim is true or false, but sceptical argument establishes that we are in no position to ever establish whether it is. The truth condition is thus irrelevant to our concerns, as even if there were theoretically such a thing as knowledge independent of our awareness that we have it (as speculated by externalist theories of knowledge), we would never be able to establish that we were in possession of any particular example of it that fulfilled the truth criterion. Again, then, the argument that we do not have absolute knowledge is over-determined.

This need not prevent us from using 'knowledge' in ordinary language senses, provided we do not make the mistake (common in analytic epistemology) of assuming that the analysis of our intuitions about the ordinary language sense of knowledge is in some sense philosophically informative. Such analysis merely clarifies what we mean, but is irrelevant to the justification of claims, which are not made more or less likely to be justified by whether or not we categorise them as knowledge.

The rejection of philosophical knowledge in the wake of scepticism, however, does not necessarily imply the rejection of justification, provided justification is understood incrementally. I want to argue that a claim can be more or less justified in proportion to the evidence or other reasons for believing it, regardless of whether absolute claims can be justified. If incremental justification is possible, then some claims are

more justified than others, and relativism (understood as the view that no given claim is better justified than another claim) is *not* the implication of scepticism.

All that stands in the way of a recognition that incremental justification is possible is an assumption that incremental justification is in some sense logically dependent on absolute justification. Such a claim, though widespread since Plato's "You can't use the imperfect as a measure of anything" (Plato 1987 504c), seems to depend on a fallacy of composition. What is the case for a part need not be the case for the whole. Given that any supposed whole is also part of something else, in any case, and that the continuing attribution of parts to wholes leads indefinitely outwards, the wholes on which we are supposed to be logically dependent will have to be infinite. Are we seriously going to claim that finite concepts are dependent on infinite ones, rather than the converse, when our concept of infinity is clearly only the absence of finiteness?

Epistemically, too, sceptical arguments show the inadmissibility of claims about wholes: the ten modes of Pyrrhonism establish that we will only ever be able to experience parts, and the problem of induction that any assumptions about wholes on the basis of parts will be uncertain. Final wholes, then, are at best irrelevant abstractions that, far from being supportive of incremental justification, potentially stand in its way by providing fuel for dogma.

The implication of sceptical argument is thus not a complete failure of justification, as seems to often be assumed, but merely the failure of whole-to-part top-down forms of justification. It implies that instead of talking about 'knowledge' or 'justified true belief' we should shift our understanding of epistemic goals to that of incrementally justified belief. There is thus no such thing as 'scientific knowledge', but on the other

hand there can be a much more robust understanding of 'justified scientific belief' that accepts scepticism rather than fruitlessly resisting it. All we have to do is let go of the truth condition, and the various hypothetical appeals to it, that have often taken the place of incremental justification in analytic epistemology.

Negative and provisional assertions

A further common misunderstanding of scepticism has been the assumption that scepticism involves negative assertions. We have already seen a range of Western philosophers attempting to refute such negative assertions or question the assumptions involved in making them. It would be possible to argue on historical grounds that this involves a misinterpretation of the works of Sextus Empiricus and other ancient sceptical sources that has been common since the rediscovery and translation of Sextus Empiricus by Henri Etienne (Popkin 1992), but a historical argument would be insufficiently conclusive, and no doubt subject to merely historical objections. Another possible approach is to distinguish scepticism from Pyrrhonism, taking 'scepticism' to make negative assertions whilst 'Pyrrhonism' instead involves the suspension of judgement (Kuzminski 2008). However, this approach yields the ground of the very implications of scepticism in a way that can obscure the central point that *none of the sceptical arguments justify negative assertion*. If this is the case, a so-called sceptic who does attempt to offer negative assertions is simply offering an ineffectual argument, whereas a sceptic who sticks carefully to the recognition of uncertainty about both positive and negative assertions offers, on the contrary, a well justified position. Western philosophers who have attacked scepticism on the assumption that it makes negative assertions, then, have been attacking a straw man.

For example, in the case of the Ten Modes of Pyrrhonism, each argument points out that our senses *do not necessarily* give us correct information. It thus asserts that any possible sense-data (whether we take sense-data as 'raw' or interpreted) cannot justify any given claim *y*. If we turn this round and substitute a negation of *y*, it will be evident that this is also not justified by any possible sense-data. Similarly, with the dream argument, the recognition that any claims I make about my current experience may be mistaken does not entail that such claims *must* be mistaken.

Central to the problem is the interpretation of what kind of claims scepticism is making. If sceptics are taken to be denying any given proposition along the lines of 'the book is on the table', then the application of the excluded middle implies that they are asserting its negation, 'the book is not on the table'. It is not necessary to question the excluded middle to avoid this implication, but merely to clarify the sceptic's claim as being 'We do not know whether there is a book on the table'. This is a negative claim about our certainty, not about the book on the table. The negative claim about us notes an absence of absolute justification, not the presence of absolutely justified beliefs even about ourselves.

It is only by construing scepticism in terms of negations that the philosophers discussed above have been able to see it as impractical. It may well be the case that, when I see a book on the table, I cannot negate that belief, nor can I start to believe 'there is no book on the table' in response to sceptical considerations. But scepticism is not concerned with deleting our beliefs, only with recognising their lack of absolute justification. The practical implication of scepticism is thus neither negative belief nor a complete suspension of judgement, but rather *provisional* belief.

The concept of provisionality has been under-investigated by philosophers, even though it seems essential to successful scientific practice. I think much can be said about it, but here I will merely sketch some suggestions to show that there are positive alternatives to the way the implications of scepticism have been traditionally understood. My suggestion is that provisionality can be understood as a psychological state in which alternatives to our current beliefs can be considered and assessed. Such a psychological state is distinguished by *optionality*: that is, by the availability of options beyond the current one, by *awareness* of those options (which is obviously a matter of degree) and by the *integration* of beliefs, by which I mean that alternative beliefs do not necessarily remain separate or conflicting, but have the capacity to be re-formed by contact with each other. I have given further details of such a psychological theory of provisionality elsewhere (*identificatory reference to be inserted*), but to pursue it further here is beyond the scope of this paper.

Dogmatism and belief

An interpretation of scepticism that is compatible with provisional belief must also reject other beliefs as 'dogmatic'. The mistaken understanding that sceptical argument implies the rejection of *all* beliefs as dogmatic (e.g. Hookway 1990, 3) presumably arises from issues in the interpretation of classical scepticism. Yet if we focus neither on historical interpretation nor on modern assumption, but on the implications of the arguments themselves, it becomes evident that the boundary should be placed at a different point from that between 'belief' and what the Pyrrhonists called 'acquiescence in appearances' (Sextus Empiricus 1996, I:23-4) – at least if the latter is interpreted as somehow not involving beliefs of any kind. Rather it is *certainty* of belief that is the target of sceptical argument (whether that

certainty is positive or negative), and it is claims that are accompanied by certainty that are dogmatic.

Dogmatism, like provisionality, is very evidently a psychological state: not so much a particular proposition or set of propositions as a contextual state of mind and brain that fails to entertain alternatives, and maintains a rigid and unreflective commitment to one type of belief. As with provisionality, I think the state of dogmatism can be understood psychologically and neurally, and have explored this in more multi-disciplinary work elsewhere (*identificatory reference to be inserted*).

However, there are also some features of dogmatic belief that can be identified philosophically: these are that dogmatic beliefs are absolute, metaphysical, and understood in terms of an assumed representationalism. I want to argue that each of these can be seen from the implications of sceptical argument itself.

Dogmatic beliefs are *absolute* in the sense that they lack incrementality or incrementalisability. A belief that can be expressed in terms of qualities that form a spectrum, rather than absolute quantities and absolute qualities, is incremental. “Bambi does not exist” for example, is an absolute claim because Bambi could not exist to some extent – he either exists or does not. “The dog is black” is incrementalisable, as it is at least possible to understand it in terms that are not absolute, if we interpret the blackness of the dog as a matter of degree. Where there are degrees of a quality there are also potential degrees of justification. The sceptical arguments we have examined are justified wherever an absolute claim is made that is only understood in terms of truth or falsity as a whole, but where claims are incremental, those arguments are no longer a barrier to provisional assertion. For example, in the case of the error argument, past error raises no problems when we

interpret it to indicate a *probability* of future error, but only becomes a problem when it is assumed that future judgements can be made without error. In the case of the infinite regression argument, the infinitely regressive demand for further justification can only itself be justified if total justification is expected, and is no longer required if the criterion of judgement that we apply is one of an incremental degree of justification that has already been supplied before we demand further justification.

Dogmatic beliefs are *metaphysical* in the sense of lying beyond experience, not in the sense of involving basic assumptions that frame that experience. This element depends very much on contextual interpretation, and is not merely a product of the particular proposition used. For example, 'The book is on the table' becomes a metaphysical claim when interpreted noumenally, as asserting an ultimate relationship between an intrinsically existent book and table, but not when interpreted in a psychological state that would be open to alternatives if they were to become relevant. Other classic metaphysical claims discussed in philosophy, such as those of God's existence or non-existence, of freewill or determinism, of realism or idealism, or of ultimate value or ultimate relativity, more obviously involve dogma in this sense, because they involve claims that are independent of any particular experience and could be asserted regardless of such experiences (*identificatory reference to be inserted*).

Sceptical arguments thus imply the avoidance of both positive and negative metaphysical claims, because they cast doubt on any claims that cannot be stated in terms of experience. For example, the dream argument casts doubt on any claim that we either are or are not dreaming at this moment, as our experience would be identical in either eventuality. This does not imply that we could not identify and

make claims about basic preconditions for experience. It is not necessarily dogmatic, for example, to recognise that our experience is framed by an expectation of substance or cause. This is a generalisation about our expectations that could be challenged if we discover instances of it not occurring.

Nor should the avoidance of metaphysics be read in the terms of logical positivism (as in Ayer 1936). No assertions are being made here about meaning, only about justified belief, and metaphysical beliefs do not have to be asserted as meaningless to be unjustified. Dogmatism does not have to be understood in the narrow terms of verification or verifiability (which is continually subject to confirmation bias), but instead can be understood in terms of experiential impact. If potential experiences change one's *understanding* of a claim and its justification (not necessarily its verification), it is potentially provisional, without any need to introduce narrow and formally scientific criteria.

We must also avoid the widespread assumption that sceptical arguments are themselves metaphysical. They are metaphysical only in a critical sense, in that they provisionally adopt the assumptions of a particular context in order to show them to be absurd. Since neither positive nor negative metaphysical assertions are made by sceptics, they are metaphysically *agnostic* rather than metaphysical in the dogmatic sense given here. Agnostic beliefs are provisional ones, that may nevertheless be decisive, and that reject absolute forms of belief, whether positive or negative. They thus involve a *Middle Way* between positive and negative forms of absolutism (*identificatory reference to be inserted*).

Thirdly, dogmatic beliefs involve an assumed representationalism. By that, I mean that they assume that the meaning of the statements asserted depends on their

hypothetical truth or falsity. Such truth or falsity, if assumed in practice, requires that the meaning of a claim must be considered in isolation from the possible alternatives. On an embodied theory of meaning, on the other hand, the meaning of a claim is understood in terms of a cognitive model in which it is embedded, which is in turn understood as dependent on the metaphorical extensions of basic schemas and categories, that have become meaningful to us in the course of active physical experience.

Again, I do not have space here to discuss the full implications of this, or the background in the debate between the representationalism about meaning still widely assumed and the now well-developed alternative in the embodied meaning thesis. I have discussed this elsewhere (*identificatory reference to be inserted*) and refer readers to the work of Lakoff and Johnson (e.g. Lakoff 1987, Johnson 2007) for details of the embodied meaning thesis and the evidence both for it and against representationalism.

My suggestion is that the implications of sceptical argument can only be adequately understood in a context of embodied meaning, because it is only in an embodied model that provisional belief becomes possible. If the meanings of terms forming a claim are already available to us prior to the conceptual formation of that claim, and are understood in terms that offer flexibility, with other differing claims being potentially assembled from the same or psychologically adjacent materials, then provisionality and metaphysical agnosticism becomes possible and comprehensible. Sceptical arguments can then be seen as devices to stimulate that provisionality and challenge dogmatism. If we understand the meaning of claims only in terms of their potential truth or falsity, however, the options are already restricted, and scepticism

will appear, not as a helpful tool to stimulate provisionality, but only as a bewildering and paradoxical play on the edge of an abyss.

'Global' and 'local' scepticism

Traditional philosophical discussion of this area has distinguished between 'global' scepticism applied to all beliefs and 'local' or 'mitigated' scepticism applied to some beliefs but not others: to the extent that this distinction is found in virtually every philosophy textbook that discusses scepticism. I want to argue that this distinction is entirely spurious. So-called 'local' scepticism is not worthy of the name, because sceptical arguments depend on even-handedness. An argument does not become sceptical merely by reason that it involves doubt, but rather by reason that it applies doubt equally to *all* possible instances.

It may be objected that some of the sceptical arguments listed at the beginning of this paper (i.e. numbers 1-6) only apply to empirical claims, and thus allow for the possibility of scepticism that only applies to empirical claims but not *a priori* ones. However, I have already argued that scepticism is over-determined by a range of arguments, and given that arguments 7-9 all apply just as much to *a priori* claims, there is no possible justification for limiting sceptical argument to empirical claims.

Other arguments for 'local' scepticism tend to assume that global scepticism undermines all belief, and that some beliefs are necessary for practical operation. Hume's argument (as already discussed above) is of this kind when he claims that nature drives us to believe in commonsense realities. As I have argued above, scepticism does not imply the abandonment of all belief, but only the abandonment of absolute justification and claims to truth. Since it is quite possible to maintain

provisional beliefs whilst accepting sceptical argument, there is no reason why we should be selective in our use of sceptical arguments.

The partial or selective use of sceptical argument is also incompatible with the implications of that argument, in the sense that any continuing acceptance of beliefs that could be undermined by scepticism will be inconsistent with the use of scepticism. For example, a rationalist who uses sceptical arguments against empirical claims without also applying sceptical argument to *a priori* claims will be guilty of inconsistency and subject to further sceptical criticism. Similarly, an atheist who uses sceptical arguments against the existence of God, but fails to consider sceptical arguments against the claim that God does not exist, will have no grounds to claim the title 'sceptic'. The appropriation of the term 'sceptic' by positive atheists is thus unjustified.

For similar reasons, there can be no such thing as an 'extreme' sceptic. Scepticism, in its all-encompassing even-handedness, is unavoidably moderate, because its implication when doubting one position is not to adopt the opposite. Rather, sceptics will avoid both absolute positive claims and absolute negative claims. On the contrary, it will be those who use scepticism selectively, and reject one position whilst failing to avoid the opposite, that will be guilty of extremism.

Of course, the popular use of 'sceptic' (to mean someone who merely rejects a position of any kind and finds argument against it) raises ordinary language issues here as it does in relation to 'knowledge' and 'certainty'. Just as arguments against certainty or knowledge in the full philosophical sense are not arguments against their possibility in an ordinary language sense, arguments in favour of scepticism in the full philosophical sense are not arguments in favour of its ordinary language sense.

On the contrary, sceptical argument in the full philosophical sense is very likely to undermine all popular and partial forms of 'scepticism'. In all these cases, the philosophical sense is not 'impractical', but on the contrary of more practical helpfulness than partial and dogmatic uses, because it requires us to subject *all* assumptions to even-handed critical scrutiny, and thus aids us in detecting error when more partial approaches would fail to do so.

Conclusion

My argument, then, is here based only on the implications of scepticism itself, even though psychological and other scientific evidence could potentially also be brought in to support this view of scepticism. Sceptical argument has been vastly misinterpreted in the Western tradition, in the sense that it has been assumed to be a threat of some kind. But it is a threat only to dogma. Since none of us is immune from dogma, that makes scepticism not a threat, but a beneficial challenge to stimulate re-examination of beliefs that have become rigidified. The practical value of scepticism, entirely contrary to what has often been assumed, lies in its global critique of all possible beliefs, and its ability to help us differentiate provisional beliefs (which are sceptic-proof) from dogmatic ones that are not. The more globally and even-handedly scepticism is used, the more beneficial it will be, and the more likely it is that confusion with negative assertion can be avoided.

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