

Responses to scepticism¹

(This handout follows the handout ‘Scepticism’. You should read that handout first. For Descartes’ response to scepticism, see the handout ‘Descartes’ sceptical arguments’.)

EMPIRICIST RESPONSES TO SCEPTICISM

Empiricists deny that there is any a priori knowledge of synthetic propositions. This can be understood as a form of local scepticism. They restrict the knowledge that we have to

1. (a priori) knowledge of analytic propositions and what can be deduced from them;
2. (a posteriori) knowledge of synthetic propositions about the world outside one’s minds; and
3. knowledge of our own minds, derived from impressions of reflection.

Any claim that does not fall under one of these three categories, we do not know. One objection to empiricism is that this restriction on knowledge is too severe. It leads to local scepticism across many branches of supposed knowledge. For example, can we know that God exists? If ‘God exists’ is a synthetic claim, according to empiricism, we could only know that God exists from sense experience. But can we? Hume argued that we can’t - the reasoning involves claims that sense experience cannot establish. So we can’t know whether God exists.

Another example is morality. Moral claims, such as ‘Murder is wrong’, don’t appear to be analytic. But could we know them through sense experience? Which of our senses pick up on ‘wrongness’, and how? If empiricists can’t show that moral claims are either analytic or a posteriori, then they will be forced to conclude that there is no moral knowledge either.

We put these local scepticisms aside to ask how empiricists respond to global scepticism and the attack on knowledge from sense experience. As indirect realists, Locke, Russell and Trotter Cockburn argue that we only immediately perceive sense-data, and we must infer the cause of our sense experiences. They defend the claim that an external world of physical objects is that cause on the grounds that it is the best explanation of our experience, in particular, that it is involuntary, coherent between different sense modalities (vision, hearing etc.), and that it is systematic.

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for AS and A Level: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge), Ch. 2, pp. 195-8

However, there are two objections that may be raised to this argument understood as a response to scepticism. First, Descartes argues that the existence of the external world remains a hypothesis - we cannot know with certainty that physical objects exist. But we can respond that Descartes sets the standard for knowledge too high - knowledge does not require certainty. If the existence of physical objects is the best explanation of our sense experience, this is sufficient justification for us to know that they exist (if the belief is also true). Rather than respond to scepticism by appealing to rational intuition and deduction to meet the demand for certainty, this response rejects the demand for certainty.

The second objection challenges the claim that the existence of physical objects is the best explanation for our sense experience. If we are brains in vats, then our sense experience is exactly as it is now - involuntary, coherent, systematic - and yet the world is nothing like we experience it. (Ok, so a physical object, the supercomputer, exists, but this is hardly the result Russell and others were after!) Our experience provides no reason to prefer the hypothesis of physical objects over the hypothesis of being a brain in a vat. Both explanations of our experience are equally good. So inference to the best explanation cannot show that we can rule out the possibility of being brains in vats. So it doesn't meet the challenge of global scepticism.

Berkeley takes a completely different approach. He removes the challenge of scepticism by rejecting the distinction between appearance and reality. What we experience is reality. Idealism has no need to discover how our perceptions of physical objects relate to reality. In experiencing ideas, we are experiencing what exists.

One interesting point about Berkeley's argument is that his understanding of the relation between our minds and God as the source of our perceptions is rather similar to the relation between our brains and the supercomputer in the brain in a vat thought experiment. Berkeley infers that something outside my mind must cause my perceptions, and given the complexity of my experience, that something must be God. But could it be a supercomputer instead?! Berkeley would, of course, respond that a supercomputer is a physical object (as is a brain), and we have no reason to think that physical objects can exist independent of minds. The thought experiment is incoherent.

The responses we have discussed in this section are from classical empiricists (and Russell). But empiricism may be combined with reliabilism (as well as other theories of knowledge). So the response that follows next can also count as empiricist as it defends our ability to gain knowledge from sense experience.

RELIABILISM AS A RESPONSE TO SCEPTICISM

Reliabilism disputes the theory of knowledge that scepticism assumes. Scepticism assumes that knowledge requires justification, but argues that our usual justifications for claiming our beliefs amount to knowledge are inadequate, so we do not in fact have knowledge. Reliabilism counters that our true beliefs do not need to be justified to count as knowledge, they only need to be produced by a

reliable cognitive process, that is, a process that produces a high percentage of true beliefs.

Suppose I am not a brain in a vat. Then perception is a reliable process - most of the beliefs I form on the basis of sense experience are, in fact, true. That is enough to say that I gain knowledge from sense experience - my beliefs are true and produced by a reliable cognitive process. I do not need, in addition, to justify my beliefs, e.g. to have evidence that perception is reliable. In particular, I do not need to know that I am not a brain in a vat. If I am not a brain in a vat, then, because perception is a reliable process, I know that there are physical objects.

This can sound very counterintuitive. If I am a brain in a vat, then I don't know that there are physical objects. Even the reliabilist agrees with that: if I am a brain in a vat, how I form beliefs is very unreliable, and most of them are false. So surely I need to know that I am not a brain in a vat, and that my beliefs are caused by a reliable process, in order to know that there are physical objects.

But as an objection to reliabilism, this point is confused. First, reliabilism can respond that there is a difference between knowing that p and knowing that I know that p. Suppose that I don't know whether I am a brain in a vat. If that's true, then I don't know whether perception is reliable or not. So since I don't know whether perception is reliable, I can't know that I know that there are physical objects. This is all true, but why does any of this matter? If I'm not a brain in a vat, then - whether I know it or not - perception is reliable, and so I know that there are physical objects.

Why should we think that in order to know that p, I must also know that I know that p? It could be that the cognitive process that produces beliefs about p is reliable, but the cognitive process that produces beliefs about what I know is unreliable. In such a case, I can know that p without knowing that I know that p. For instance, animals can gain knowledge through perception, but they can't even think about whether they are brains in vats, let alone having reliable thoughts about such matters. Reliabilists reject the sceptical claim that we cannot know about physical objects through perception unless we know that we are not brains in vats.