

Keeping the Faith: The Case Against Epistemological Nihilism

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1. Skepticism and Nihilism

Epistemologists spend a great deal of time and energy in the effort to respond to skepticism. But what exactly *is* the problem of skepticism? It is often thought that skepticism is the claim that we don't *know* anything. But it is hard to see how one would argue for such a claim (much less how one would respond to it). Perhaps one could show that we can't rule out a certain skeptical alternative -- that we are, say, disembodied Brains-In-a-Vat (BIVs). But even if this argument is correct and we *can't* rule out the possibility of our being BIVs, does this entail that we can't know anything at all? Surely not. All it shows is that we can't be *certain* of anything. But the move from "no certainty" to "no knowledge" assumes an infallibilist standard knowledge that is highly implausible. If by "knowledge" you mean "certainty", we can all agree that we don't have *that*, just as we can all agree that there are no physicians in New York City if by "physician" you mean "a person who has a medical degree and can cure any conceivable illness in less than two minutes".¹ Today, we are all fallibilists: no respected philosopher thinks knowledge requires certainty. So the problem of skepticism can't be our lack of certainty. And since a requirement of certainty seems to be the only way to directly attack our claim to have knowledge, then the problem of skepticism doesn't seem *at its root* to be a problem about knowledge. If skepticism was just the rejection of certainty, the problem would not command the kind of perennial interest it does; skepticism would have disappeared long ago.

A more plausible candidate for the problem of skepticism is that we can't have *justification* for any of our experiential beliefs. An argument for this claim would rest on the

assumption that the way things *seem* does not necessarily tell us anything about the way things *are*. Note that unlike knowledge-skepticism, justification-skepticism does not demand certainty. The claim is not merely that we do not have sufficient reason to be certain of our beliefs. Rather it is that since appearance and reality are distinct, appearances give us *no reason at all* to believe anything about reality. This is often called the “no good inference argument” since it implies that facts about external reality cannot be inferred from facts about internal experiences.² But note that the problem is not about the necessity of a *psychological* inference. Even if we do not in fact make an inference at the psychological level, we still need to be able to show why our beliefs about internal experiences can *justify* our beliefs about the external reality. The problem is about the “epistemic priority” of subjective experience over belief in objective reality.³ As long as we hold on to a minimal metaphysical realism that says we could be wrong about the way things are (which is what the fallibilist rejection of certainty is supposed to allow), then it is hard to see how appearances give us any justification for beliefs about reality. So *the root problem of skepticism seems to be the impossibility of epistemic justification*. And of course, since any plausible epistemology will take justification to be a necessary condition for knowledge, then it follows that if we can’t have justification we can’t have knowledge either.

Now that we have gotten an idea of what the problem of skepticism *is*, we can turn to the question of who the skeptics *are*. In *Putting Skeptics In Their Place*, John Greco points out an interesting fact: there *are no* skeptics.⁴ And there have in fact *never been* any skeptics.⁵

¹Stroud, Barry. *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism*. (Oxford, 1984), p. 40.

²See, for example, Greco, John. *Putting Skeptics In Their Place*. (Cambridge, 2000), p. 84.

³Stroud, Barry. “Understanding Human Knowledge In General”, reprinted in *Understanding Human Knowledge*. (Oxford, 2000), p. 104.

⁴Greco, 22.

⁵Chatalian, George. *Epistemology and Skepticism*. Journal of the History of Philosophy Monograph Series (Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), p. 10. Chatalian argues that modern analytic philosophers like Wittgenstein, Ayer, Ryle, and Quine *invented* skepticism. See

Another way of putting this point is to say that no one believes that experience gives us no reason at all to believe anything about the external world. The closest thing we have to genuine skeptics are skeptics about *epistemology*. These are philosophers like Barry Stroud and others in the Humean epistemological tradition on the one hand as well as Michael Williams and other so-called contextualists on the other hand.⁶ Both Humeans and contextualists believe we have knowledge in ordinary contexts but lose knowledge when we "enter the study" and start doing epistemology.⁷ So everyone agrees that we do know many things. Some of us just think it is impossible to understand how our knowledge is possible -- that is, it is impossible to have a general theory of knowledge. This pessimistic view about the possibility of an adequate epistemology is what I will call *epistemological nihilism*. In this paper, I will argue negatively that epistemological nihilism is unwarranted: there is no good reason to think that we cannot come to understand knowledge. Moreover, I will argue positively that there is good reason to think that we can come to understand knowledge.

My strategy for responding to epistemological nihilism is part of an approach to epistemology that Roderick Chisholm called "particularism".⁸ On the particularist approach, we start with clear cases of knowledge and generalize an account of knowledge from them.

Particularism is thus opposed to "methodism" which starts with a general substantive theory of knowledge and then tests particular putative cases of knowledge against it -- with the possibility

especially Chapter 2 where Chatalian shows that the ancient Greeks were not skeptics in the modern sense.

⁶Along with Stroud, Michael Williams's list of "new-Humeans" includes Thomas Nagel, P.F. Strawson, and Stanley Cavell. See *Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Skepticism*. (Princeton, 1996), p. xiii. Along with Williams, major contextualists would include Keith DeRose and (on Williams's reading) Ludwig Wittgenstein.

⁷The major difference between these two views seems to be that the Humeans see skepticism as a "natural" result of intuitive pre-theoretical commitments and the contextualists see skepticism as motivated by an "unnatural" commitment to a foundationalist theory of knowledge.

⁸Chisholm, Roderick M. *The Problem of the Criterion*. (Marquette University Press, 1973).

that *none* of our putative cases turn out to be genuine knowledge. The particularist sees this possible skeptical result of the methodist approach as absurd. I know all kinds of things: I know that I exist; I know that I have hands; I know that modus ponens is a valid form of deduction; I know that $2+2=4$; etc. Any epistemology that implies that I don't know any of these things must be inadequate. Even Stroud is a particularist in this sense -- he says "no one would deny [such] sweeping platitudes about human beings" as that human beings "know things about the world around them"⁹. What Stroud denies is that there can ever be an adequate epistemological explanation of such platitudes. Here he is sliding into methodism and letting a theory of knowledge push him in the direction of skepticism. Let us look closer at the arguments for epistemological nihilism.

2. The Failure of Contextualist Replies to Skepticism

Both Stroud and Williams argue that we know all kinds of things in ordinary contexts but that when we start trying to understand *how* we know these things -- when we start doing epistemology -- our knowledge evaporates and skepticism becomes unavoidable. Stroud traces the source of this phenomenon to the demand for a "completely general understanding of knowledge" which, to be "philosophically satisfying" must not presuppose any prior knowledge.¹⁰ Thus the epistemological project, while attractive, turns out to be incoherent. Alternatively, Williams traces the source of skepticism in the philosophical attempt to take knowledge to be "the kind of thing that might be expected to be susceptible of uniform theoretical analysis".¹¹ Williams agrees with Stroud that *if* we try to understand all our

⁹Stroud, Barry. "Epistemological Reflection on Knowledge of the External World" reprinted in *Understanding Human Knowledge*, p.123.

¹⁰ "Understanding Human Knowledge in General", p. 120.

¹¹ Williams, 102.

knowledge as a whole, then skepticism follows.¹² But in rejecting knowledge as an object of theory, Williams is rejecting the attempt to understand knowledge in general. So here the traditional epistemological project is doubly incoherent: not only does it fail on its own terms, but it's a theory about something that doesn't exist! In the end, then, Stroud and Williams agree that it is impossible to give a philosophical account of knowledge in general; Williams just isn't bothered by that fact.

Now, remember that both Stroud and Williams reject the claim that no belief about the external world can be justified at all. So they are not skeptics in the sense identified above. But they do turn out to be skeptics of a sort. They just want to limit skepticism to certain contexts.

Williams nicely sums up the position:

I have never denied that the skeptic is conditionally correct, in the sense that, by the standards he insists on applying, we never know anything about the world. My point has always been that these standards are something *we* apply. They are not built into the human condition but into a particular intellectual project, itself far from theory free, and standards that are brought into play by a particular project have no claim on us outside it. Accordingly, since foundationalist standards are not in play in the course of common life, my knowledge ordinarily extends to the tacit knowledge that I am not a brain in a vat.¹³

So the epistemological nihilist turns out to be a skeptic in limited contexts. What Stroud adds to this view (an addition which Williams seems to deny) is that it is intellectually *desirable* to theorize in this way about knowledge. As Stroud puts it, "I think we would learn a lot about human knowledge, and about the human urge to philosophize, if we could ever find what it is and where it comes from".¹⁴ But if Stroud and Williams are right, this desire for understanding can never be satisfied since epistemological theorizing inevitably leads to skepticism.

¹² Williams, 127-128.

¹³ Williams, 354.

¹⁴ Stroud, Barry. "Epistemological Reflection on Knowledge of the External World" reprinted in *Understanding Human Knowledge*, p.137.

There are at least two problems with the contextualist attempt to limit the efficacy of skepticism to theoretical contexts.¹⁵ First Stroud and contextualists like Williams all assume that merely raising an alternate possibility makes it relevant. (A contextualist says that an alternate possibility is relevant only in those contexts in which it is raised.) Thus they see the hypothesis that we could be BIVs as an *ordinary* defeater to the prima facie justification of sense perception. But this misdiagnoses the skeptical challenge which says we have *no* justification (not even prima facie justification!) for any of our beliefs.¹⁶ Moreover, a skeptical hypothesis isn't an ordinary defeater, since we normally require defeaters to be justified themselves in order to undermine the justification of another belief. So it makes little sense to say that the *mere raising* of an alternate possibility makes it relevant.

This brings us to the second problem with contextualism. Even if we grant that an unjustified alternate possibility can serve as a defeater, why would the consequent doubt be context bound? It is hard to see why, if skepticism is right in the theoretical contexts, skepticism is not right in ordinary contexts, too. We can all agree that the *process* of justification is context-sensitive (in the sense that the standard we have for the putative-knower's ability to *give reasons* varies with the context), but we cannot conclude from this that the *property* of justifiedness is contextual. If a belief is justified in one context, surely it is justified in all contexts -- even if the acceptable reasons we can marshal are context-dependent.¹⁷

Williams's answer to the challenge to say why skepticism does not spread from one context to another is that the term "knowledge" means something different in different contexts. But if this is right, then why would we use the same word? Isn't it reasonable to expect various

¹⁵ I owe these two anti-contextualist objections to Peter Graham.

¹⁶ Pryor, James. "The Skeptic and the Dogmatist," *Nous*. 34:4 (2000), p. 534.

¹⁷ Audi, Robert. *The Architecture of Reason: The Structure and Substance of Rationality* (Oxford, 2001), p. 28.

instances of the same term to have *something* in common even if it is difficult to say precisely what? As Williams himself concedes, many of our everyday terms are “loose” in a way that makes it difficult to give them a unified theoretical account (his example is the term “chair”), but that does not mean that there is *nothing* that these terms have in common.¹⁸ But if there really is some condition for knowledge that transcends contexts in the relevant way, then Williams’s case against the reality “knowledge” as an object of theory collapses.

So the epistemological nihilist’s attempt to limit skepticism to theoretical contexts fails. Hence skepticism does not arise from epistemic priority alone -- if it did, then contextualists would be able to avoid skepticism by rejecting epistemic priority. I will next argue that Stroud and Williams both assume a certain epistemic theory that entails skepticism. If I am right, then contextualists have a commitment to a substantive epistemology prior to their consideration of particular cases of knowledge -- hence they are methodists. What is this theoretical commitment which forms the basis of skepticism? That is the topic we shall consider next.

3. Linking Justification With Truth¹⁹

In section 1, it sounded as if metaphysical realism (the idea that reality is not determined by how it appears to us) and the consequent doctrine of epistemic priority (the idea that our knowledge of appearances is prior to our knowledge of reality) together formed the basis of skepticism. But then in section 2 we saw that although contextualists reject epistemic priority, they still cannot solve the problem of skepticism. Another bit of evidence to support this conclusion is that most philosophers throughout history have accepted both metaphysical realism

¹⁸ Williams, 109.

and epistemic priority but did not feel compelled to accept skepticism. Were they just not very bright? Or did something change in the modern period? Williams puts his finger on the problem when he points out that metaphysical “realism seems to open the way to skepticism by making it impossible to account for the necessary truth-conduciveness of epistemic justification” since metaphysical realism rests on the intuition “that our beliefs about the objective world, no matter how well supported evidentially, do not have to be true”.²⁰ As we have seen, Williams thinks he is able to avoid the need for necessary connection between truth and justification simply by not thinking of justification as a property of beliefs. But ignoring the problem doesn’t make it go away. Fortunately, the break between justification and truth is relatively new development in epistemology.

The medieval scholastics, following Aristotle, had a theory of knowledge such that there is a necessary connection between ideas and reality. Descartes rejected this theory -- probably because the scholastics’ metaphysical story about their theory was false. On the medieval view, perception occurs when a kind of “form” (called a “sensible species”) is transmitted from a material object to the subject’s eye.²¹ Obviously if ideas are caused by the very thing that makes a material object what it is flying through the air and hitting you in the eye, then there is a necessary connection between appearance and reality. But modern physics called this account of perception into question. So Descartes used his famous “method of doubt” in an attempt to show that there is no such necessary connection between appearance and reality. But perhaps

¹⁹ My take on the basis of skepticism is derived from a series of unpublished papers by Peter Graham.

²⁰ Williams, p. 229.

²¹ This is, of course, an oversimplification (perhaps even a caricature) of the medieval story. For a nice, concise explication of the Thomistic theory of perception, see Hoffman, Paul. “Direct Realism, Intentionality, and the Objective Being of Ideas,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 83 (2002), p. 166

Descartes was too hasty. Is there a way to keep the Aristotelian conclusion without the scholastic metaphysics? There are at least two contemporary attempts to do just that.

First let us consider *reliabilism*. Reliabilism is the view that justification is reliability -- i.e., a belief is justified if it is formed on the basis of a reliable process.²² Since it was introduced by Alvin Goldman in 1979, many philosophers have thought reliabilism could solve the problem of skepticism. And reliabilism does seem to explain the truth-conducivity of justification. But traditional reliabilism only gives us a *contingent* connection between justification and truth; all it requires is that a belief-forming process (or cognitive faculty) be *de facto* reliable. But *de facto* reliability has a serious flaw. Laurence Bonjour famously showed that *de facto* reliability is not sufficient for justification since there could be “clairvoyant powers” which yield reliably true beliefs even though things do not seem reliable from the subject’s perspective.²³ So we need something stronger. We need some sort of *necessary* connection between truth and justification -- we need what George Bealer calls “modal reliabilism”.²⁴ To date, Bealer has only worked out his theory in detail for a priori knowledge, but he suggests that it would work for empirical knowledge, too. An interesting version of modal reliabilism that has been developed for perceptual belief is what Peter Graham calls “per se reliabilism”. According to per se reliabilism, a belief is justified if it is produced by a reliable belief-forming process in normal circumstances. “Normal circumstances” here means those circumstances in which you acquired the belief-forming process, provided that you acquired it because it helped you cope with your environment by accurately representing it.

²² Goldman, Alvin. “What is Justified Belief?” In *Justification and Knowledge*, ed. G.S. Pappas (D. Reidel, 1979).

²³ Bonjour, Laurence. *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*. (Harvard, 1985).

²⁴ Bealer, George. “A Theory of the A Priori,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 81 (2000), p. 7ff.

But how is modal reliabilism supposed to block skepticism? Most versions of modal reliabilism assume semantic externalism, the view that meaning (or mental content) is determined not by something internal to the belief, but by the external object that caused the belief. On this view, then, we could not have the concepts that we have unless they were caused by something external to us. In other words, we could not have the concepts we have if we were BIVs. And since concepts and beliefs are holistic in the sense that every belief entails many other beliefs, another way of putting the semantic externalist's skeptical rejoinder is this: in order to have any thoughts at all, most of our beliefs must be true. So the fact that our belief is justified makes it objectively more likely than not to be true -- justification is necessarily truth-conducive.

Modal reliabilism seems to provide us with everything we need to solve the problem of skepticism, but there semantic externalism has some theoretical "kinks" to work out. And if semantic externalism doesn't work, then modal reliabilism won't work either. The most pressing problem for semantic externalism is known as the "disjunction problem." The problem is this: more than one external cause can be linked to the same internal representational state. For example, to a frog, bugs and B-B's look the identical. So does this mean that the frog's belief that "there is a bug in front of me" is actually "there is a bug (*or* a B-B, *or* a tiny alien spacecraft, *or* etc.) in front of me"? There are probably ways of solving the disjunction problem, but no perfectly satisfactory solution has yet been found.

So semantic externalism has problems, which means modal reliabilism has problems. But the major alternative seems to have problems as well. The second contemporary attempt to demonstrate the necessary truth conducivity of justification is what might be called *intuitionism*.

As James Pryor explains it, intuitionism (he calls it “dogmatism”) simply *insists*, contra skepticism, that experience justifies belief. Pryor writes:

For a large class of propositions, like the proposition that there are hands, it’s intuitively very natural to think that having an experience as of that proposition justifies one in believing that proposition to be true ... I say, let’s take these intuitive appearances at face value.²⁵

The idea is that in ordinary circumstances we don’t demand anything further for justification than simple perceptual experience, so that must be all that’s necessary for justification. The problem is obvious: intuitionism gives us few details for *how* justification is supposed to be necessarily truth-conducive. In most versions of intuitionism, there is nothing like the modal reliabilist’s appeal to semantic externalism to fill in the theoretical details of the account. And the most likely theory to serve this purpose is controversial. The intuitionist could make use of an *intentionalist* (also called “phenomenological”) account of concepts like the one described by Dallas Willard.²⁶ On Willard’s view (which bears some resemblance to the views of Thomas Reid and Edmund Husserl), there is a “natural affinity” of concepts with their intensions such that the properties that make up the essence of an object are necessarily linked to the concept that describes the object.²⁷ The problem with this view is that it is metaphysically profligate and not sufficiently naturalistic. On intentionalism, concepts and properties turn out to be quite robust nonphysical entities, and the whole view starts to sound a little too medieval.

Which approach is most attractive to you will depend on your metaphysical commitments. A naturalist will find intuitionism difficult to swallow, and those skeptical of naturalism might find semantic externalism too dependent on empirical science. In any event, *per se* reliabilism and intuitionism both seem to appear in aspects of the medieval picture, so

²⁵ Pryor, p. 536.

²⁶ Willard, Dallas. “How Concepts Relate the Mind to its Objects: The ‘God’s Eye View’ Vindicated?” *Philosophia Christi*, Series 2, Vol. 1 (1999), No. 2.

perhaps there is somehow they can be unified into a single contemporary account. There are, of course, other ways to get a necessary connection between justification and truth. For example, we could go back to a medieval metaphysics of sensible species. Of course, despite its obvious unattractiveness to those committed to a naturalist ideology (since it is committed to the real existence of nonphysical entities), even philosophers willing to allow the existence of nonphysical entities will find it difficult to square the medieval view with contemporary physics and biology. I can also imagine an ontological argument for the existence of God doing the job -- perhaps combined with Davidson's omniscient interpreter argument²⁸, or perhaps instead combined with a Cartesian belief in the necessary truthfulness of deity. None of these approaches (per se reliabilism, intuitionism, Thomism, or Cartesianism, etc.) is the obviously right way to go. Perhaps on further inquiry none of them will turn out to be right. But, as epistemological particularists and non-nihilists, we must keep the faith: there must be *some* way to show the necessary truth-conducivity of justification.

4. Keeping the Faith

Let's summarize the findings of this paper so far. The problem of skepticism is that if metaphysical realism is correct we seem to have no reason at all for believing our experiences correspond to reality. But this problem only arises if we think justification is only contingently truth-conducive. If we return to a pre-Cartesian epistemology in which justification is necessarily truth-conducive, we can solve the problem of skepticism. But all contemporary (and ancient, for that matter) attempts to explain the modal tie between truth and justification have problems. The epistemological nihilist is pessimistic that these problems can ever be overcome.

²⁷ Willard, p. 14.

But this pessimism arises from a methodist approach to epistemology that begins with a theory of knowledge before examining particular putative cases of knowledge. As epistemological particularists, however, we can avoid the pessimistic conclusion. We have faith that we know all sorts of things. So we start with the clear cases of knowledge and generate our epistemology from them. If our theory ends up being committed to skepticism, we know we have made a mistake, and so we back up and begin again. There is no need for pessimism unless we assume a priori that any theory of knowledge must have a contingent connection between truth and justification. We can call this particularist approach to solving the skeptical problem, *keeping the epistemic faith*.

This faith-based anti-skeptical argument can be summarized thus: (1) If there is no modal tie between justification and truth, then skepticism is correct. (2) Skepticism is not correct. (3) Therefore, there must be a modal tie between justification and truth. The argument is valid, and if my diagnosis of the problem of skepticism is right, then the argument is sound. Since we know all sorts of things, justification *must* be necessarily truth-conducive, even if we don't yet know how to explain this fact.

It is important to note that "faith" is not dogmatism in any negative sense. Dogmatism is

It is important to note that "faith" is not dogmatism in any negative sense. Dogmatism is dismissive of the skeptical problem. Faith, on the other hand, takes the problem seriously but has confidence that there must be a solution. As Robert Adams puts it,

Faith is, or involves, believing something that a rational person might be seriously tempted to doubt, or even not to believe. ... It includes doubt, and a certain sensitivity to opposing reasons, as well as a certain resistance to them. In this

²⁸ Davidson, Donald. "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," reprinted in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*. (Oxford, 2001), p.150-151.

way the virtue of faith involves holding to a mean between vices of credulity and incredulity.²⁹

And not only do we resist the pessimistic conclusion to the problem of skepticism, if our diagnosis of skepticism is correct, then we know where to begin looking for the solution: there must be a modal tie between justification and truth.

In the end, the *truth* of our beliefs will always be external to us. So we cannot answer the most radical skeptics. To expect internal access to truth is to expect certainty. And we can't have certainty about very much. But if there is a necessary connection between justification and truth and justification is internally accessible, then we can be reasonably confident that we have knowledge -- we can have faith without being dogmatic. So Stroud is right when he says that

In the philosophical investigation of knowledge we want more than the falsity of skepticism and more than the mere possession of knowledge we ordinarily think we've got. We want to understand how we know the things we know, how skepticism turns out not to be true.³⁰

But he is wrong to be pessimistic about our search for an answer. We must keep the faith.

²⁹ Adams, Robert Merrihew. *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (Oxford, 1999), p. 374.

³⁰ "Understanding Human Knowledge in General", p. 114.