

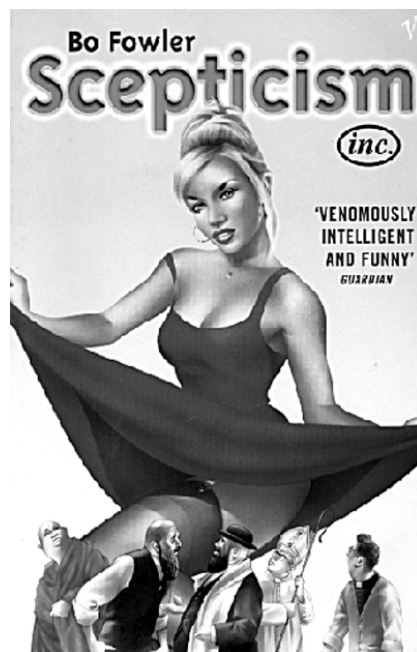
Disbelieving the skeptics without proving them wrong

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Moore's paradox

Why is (1) following inappropriate to assert?

(1) p , but I do not believe that p

Belief approach:

- one should believe what one asserts
- believing a conjunction entails believing its conjuncts
- believing that one does not believe that p entails that one does not believe that p

Knowledge approach:

- one should only assert what one knows
- knowing a conjunction entails knowing its conjuncts
- knowing entails truly believing

The knowledge approach nicely explains the inappropriateness of an utterance of:

(2) p , but I do not know that p

It does not, however, explain the inappropriateness of an utterance of:

(3) p , but I do not entertain (the thought) that p

Pragmatic indefensibility: an assertion is defective if it is – for reasons that are internal to it – unable to convince, i.e. if it undermines the supposition that there are reasons to believe what is asserted. An assertion that p is proper only if p is compatible with everything I take myself to know.

Choosing the framework

A *doxastic alternative* for a at t is a possible world the actuality of which a is in no position to rule out given what he thinks to know at t about the world he takes to be actual.

$$(4) \quad w \models Bp \quad :\Leftrightarrow \quad \forall v(wDAv \rightarrow v \models p)$$

$$(5) \quad w \models Dp \quad :\Leftrightarrow \quad \exists v(wDAv \wedge v \models \neg p)$$

Two interpretations of “a way the actual world could have been (given what we know about it)”:

- **externalist interpretation:** anything which is compatible with our knowledge might be the world we happen to inhabit
- **internalist interpretation:** a possible world which we could take ourselves to inhabit and which is compatible with what we think we know

Pragmatic indefensibility

Why is (1) indefensible?

- because DA is transitive
- (better:) because it can only be believed in worlds which are contradictory or inaccessible to themselves

If I assert that p , I thereby commit myself to the claim that p might be true even if everything I take myself to know about the actual world were true (if the actual world were my only doxastic alternative).

(1) cannot be rationally believed in 'reflexive' worlds, i.e. worlds w such that $wDAw$.

(6) I believe that p , but I do not disbelieve that $\neg p$.

(6) can be believed only in worlds which have only worlds as doxastic alternatives which themselves have no doxastic alternatives.

(7) p , but I do not disbelieve that $\neg p$.

(7) can only be believed in worlds which only have doxastic alternatives that are doxastically inaccessible to themselves.

$w \models Bp \wedge \neg Bp$ w is contradictory

$w \models p \wedge \neg Bp$ w is inaccessible to itself or contradictory

$w \models Bp \wedge \neg D\neg p$ all of w 's doxastic alternatives are dead ends

$w \models p \wedge \neg D\neg p$ w has only doxastic alternatives which are inaccessible to themselves

Framing the sceptical question

A sceptic is someone who believes that no one ever knows something. The sceptical question is: “How do you know that you know something?”

Proposed strategy:

Dodge the question by justifying our preexisting belief that the sceptic is wrong.

Dilemma:

Either we find a hidden contradiction in what the sceptic presents as possible or else we simply declare our psychological inability to believe him.

Solution:

View scepticism as an epidemic: we do not have to convince those among us who are already infected with the sceptical virus; instead, we have to prevent the sceptical disease from propagating, i.e. to detain the sceptics among us of convincing others. We have to win a three-person game between the sceptic, the antiseptic and the innocent bystander – show to the innocent bystander that skepticism requires a leap of faith.

Meeting the sceptics' challenge

What the sceptic wants the innocent bystander to say:

I am not deluded, but I do not disbelieve that I am deluded.

$$\neg p \wedge \neg Dp$$

The problem with (7):

- It can only be believed in worlds which have only doxastic alternatives that are inaccessible to themselves.
- It can only be true *and* believed in worlds which are 'anti-symmetric' (such that every doxastic alternative to them does not have them among its doxastic alternatives).

What the sceptic wants:

That we suspend our confidence in our knowledge claims, i.e. accept the following:

(8) I know that p , but (for the sake of the argument) I do not
disbelieve that I do not know that p .

If we are to accept (8), however, we believe that we know that p and at the same time we suspend our negative answer to the sceptics' suggestion that we do not actually know that p . Such a belief, however, can only be true *and* believed in worlds which are 'anti-symmetric'. Belief in (7) requires a leap of faith and (8) asks us to take this leap. (8) asks us to epistemically place ourselves in worlds from which there is no road back to the world where we take ourselves to be. And we are within our rights to refuse such an invitation to a take a leap of faith.

How you know you are not a brain in a vat

Descartes in the First Meditation:

“Mais, en y pensant soigneusement, je me ressouviens d’avoir été souvent trompé, lors que je dormais, par de semblables illusions. Et m’arrestant sur cette pensée, je voy si manifestement qu’il n’y a point d’indices concluans, ny de marques, assez certaines par où j’en puisse distinguer nettement la veille d’avec le sommeil, que j’en suis tout étonné; & mon étonnement est tel, qu’il est presque capable de me persuader que je dors.” (AT IX/I 15)

Putnam on brains in a vat:

“It follows [from the fact that brains in a vat cannot refer to things they are stand in no causal contact with] that if their ‘possible world’ is really the actual one, and we are really the brains in a vat, then what we now mean by ‘we are brains in a vat’ is that *we are brains in a vat in the image* or something of that kind (if we mean anything at all). But part of the hypothesis that we are brains in a vat is that we aren’t brains in a vat in the image (i.e. what we are ‘hallucinating’ isn’t that we are brains in a vat), So, if we are brains in a vat, then the sentence ‘We are brains in a vat’ says something false (if it says anything). In short, if we are brains in a vat, then ‘We are brains in a vat’ is false. So it is (necessarily) false.” (1981, 15)

(9) “If I were a brain in a vat, I wouldn’t take the actual world

for what I actually take it to be, namely possibly actual.”

- If you were dreaming now, you would not believe you were dreaming.
- If you were a brain in a vat, you would not believe you were a brain in a vat.

The antiskeptical argument from (9)

1. Suppose that there is a world w where I am a brain in a vat.
2. I therefore do not, in w , believe that I am a brain in a vat.
3. So I have, in w , a doxastic alternative which does not make it true that I am such a brain.
4. Given that, in w , I would be supposing that I am a brain in a vat in w , this world cannot be w .
5. If I would not disbelieve in w that I am a brain in a vat, no world where I am a brain in the vat would be among my doxastic alternatives.
6. In particular, w itself would not be among my doxastic alternatives: w would be a non-reflexive world.
7. But I cannot take a non-reflexive world to be possibly actual.
8. So I disbelieve, in w , that I am not a brain in a vat.
9. So (discharging the supposition): Supposing that there is a world w where I am not a brain in a vat, I have to ascribe to myself, in w , disbelief that I am not a brain in a vat.
10. So I would not, in such a world, believe that I am not a brain in a vat.
11. But I believe that I am not a brain in a vat.
12. So I am not a brain in a vat.

The crucial premiss (11) makes it impossible to use the argument outlined above to convince the skeptic. For not believing that $\neg p$ is, in general, compatible with there being a doxastic alternative where $\neg p$, as long as there is another doxastic alternative where p . For the skeptic, the existence of a doxastic alternative where he is a brain in a vat is guaranteed. For us, however, it is precisely this existence that is at stake. Given that we already believe that we are not brains in a vat, no such doxastic alternative exists. So the skeptic's convinces only those who are believers already. It requires a leap of faith.

How do you know you are not fooled by an Evil Demon

“Toutesfois il y a longtemps que j’ay dans mon esprit une certaine opinion, qu’il y a un Dieu qui peut tout, & par qui j’ay esté créé é & produit tel que je suis. Or qui me peut avoir assuré que ce Dieu n’ait point fait qu’il n’y ait aucune terre, aucun Ciel, aucun corps estendu, aucune figure, aucune grandeur, aucun lieu, & que neantmoins j’aye les sentimens de toutes ces choses, & que tout cela ne me semble point exister autrement que je le voy? Et mesme, comme je juge quelquefois que les autres se méprennent, mesme dans les choses qu’ils pensent scavoir avec le plus de certitude, il se peut faire qu’il ait voulu que je me trompe toutes les fois que je fais l’addition de deux & de trois, ou que je nombre les costez d’un carré, ou que je juge de quelque chose encore plus facile, si l’on se peut imaginer rien de plus facile que cela.” (AT IX/I 16)

The Cartesian thinker entertains the possibility that he might be fooled even in things he considers most certain – due to the manipulation of an omnipotent evil demon who perverts his epistemic instincts and makes him spontaneously assent to propositions which are in fact false. He discovers that there is one belief (he would express by “sum”) that is epistemically irresistible:

“Mais je me suis persuadé qu’il n’y a rien du tout dans le monde, qu’il n’y avait aucun ciel, aucune terre, aucuns esprits, ni aucuns corps, ne me suis-je donc pas aussi persuadé que je n’étais point? Non certes, j’étais sans doute si je me suis persuadé, ou seulement si j’ai pensé quelque chose.” (AT IX/I 16)

But he still keeps falling into doubt:

“Mais il y a un je ne sçay quel trompeur tres-puissant & tres-rusé, qui employe toute son industrie à me tromper tousiours. Il n’y a donc point de doute que je suis, s’il me trompe; et qu’il me trompe tant qu’il voudra il ne saurait jamais faire que je ne sois rien, tant que je penserai être quelque chose. De sorte qu’après y avoir bien pensé, et avoir soigneusement examiné toutes choses, enfin il faut conclure, et tenir pour constant que cette proposition: *Je suis, j’existe*, est nécessairement vraie, toutes les fois que je la prononce, ou que je la conçois en mon esprit.” (AT IX/I 19)

The anti-skeptical argument

- (1) “Quid verô? Cum circa res Arithmeticas vel Geometricas aliquid valde simplex & facile considerabam, ut quôd duo & tria simul juncta sint quinque, vel similia, nunquid saltem illa satis perspicue intuebar, ut vera esse affirmarem?”

“Mais lorsque je considérais quelque chose de fort simple et de fort facile touchant l’arithmétique et la géométrie, par exemple que deux et trois joints ensemble produisent le nombre de cinq, et autres choses semblables, ne les concevais-je pas au moins assez clairement pour assurer qu’elles étaient vraies?”
- (2) Equidem non aliam ob causam de iis dubitandum esse postea judicavi, quàm quia veniebat in mentem forte aliquem Deum talem mihi naturam indere potuisse, ut etiam circa illa deciperer, quae manifestissima viderentur.
- (3) Sed quoties haec praeconcepta de summâ Dei potentiâ opinio mihi occurrit, non possum non fateri, si quidem velit, facile illi esse efficere ut errem, etiam in iis quae me puto mentis oculisquàm evidentissime intueri.
- (4) Quoties verô ad ipsas res, quas valde clare percipere arbitror, me converto, tam plane ab illis persuadeor, ut sponte erumpam in has voces:
- (5) fallat me quisquis potest, nunquam tamen efficiet ut nihil sim, quandiu me aliquid esse cogitabo; vel ut aliquando verum sit me nunquam fuisse, cùm jam verum sit me esse;
- (6) vel forte etiam ut duo & tria simul juncta plura vel pauciora sint quàm quinque, vel similia, in quibus scilicet repugnantiam agnosco manifestam.
- (7) Et certe cùm nullam occasionem habeam existimandi aliquem Deum esse deceptorem, nec quidem adhuc satis sciam utrùm sit aliquis Deus, valde tenuis &, ut ita loquar, Metaphysica dubitandi ratio est, quae tantùm ex eâ opinione dependet.
- (8) Ut autem etiam illa tollatur, quam primum occurret occasio, examinare debeo an sit Deus, &, si sit, an possit esse deceptor; hac enim re ignoratâ, non videor de ullâ aliâ plane certus esse unquam posse.”

Certes si j’ai jugé depuis qu’on pouvait douter de ces choses, ce n’a point été pour autre raison, que parce qu’il me venait en l’esprit, que peut-être quelque Dieu avait pu me donner une telle nature, que je me trompasse même touchant les choses qui me semblent les plus manifestes.

Mais toutes les fois que cette opinion ci-devant conçue de la souveraine puissance d’un Dieu se présente à ma pensée je suis contraint d’avouer qu’il lui est facile, s’il le veut, de faire en sorte que je m’abuse, même dans les choses que je crois connaître avec une évidence très grande.

Et au contraire toutes les fois que je me tourne vers les choses que je pense concevoir fort clairement, je suis tellement persuadé par elles, que de moi-même je me laisse emporter à ces paroles:

Me trompe qui pourra, si est-ce qu’il ne saurait jamais faire que je ne sois rien tandis que je penserai être quelque chose; ou que quelque jour il soit vrai que je n’aie jamais été, étant vrai maintenant que je suis,

ou bien que deux et trois joints ensemble fassent plus ni moins que cinq, ou choses semblables, que je vois clairement ne pouvoir être d’autre façon que je les conçois.

Et certes, puisque je n’ai aucune raison de croire qu’il y ait quelque Dieu qui soit trompeur, et même que je n’aie pas encore considéré celles qui prouvent qu’il y a un Dieu, la raison de douter qui dépend seulement de cette opinion, est bien légère, et pour ainsi dire métaphysique.

Mais afin de la pouvoir tout à fait ôter, je dois examiner s’il y a un Dieu [. . .]; et si je trouve qu’il y en ait un, je dois aussi examiner s’il peut être trompeur: car sans la connaissance de ces deux vérités, je ne vois pas que je puisse jamais être certain d’aucune chose.”

Reconstruction

While having his “sum”-intuition, the first person of the *Meditations* (*A*) proves his existence. Recalling the impossibility of doubting his existence and looking back to his “sum”-intuition, the Cartesian thinker (*B*) proves “cogito ergo sum”. For us readers (*C*), this amounts to a proof of the existence of a thinking substance.

	A	B	C
(1)		clear and distinct beliefs are indubitable (by me)	<i>B</i> takes “cogito ergo sum” to be indubitable (in itself)
(2)		no other beliefs are claimed by my to be indubitable (in itself) with more right than these	“cogito ergo sum” is not doubtable (in itself), unless <i>B</i> is fooled
(3)	the evil demon hypothesis seems coherent	I can, however, only entertain it <i>per impossibile</i>	<i>B</i> can at least entertain it
(4)	I cannot help having the “sum”-intuition	but even in that I could be fooled by an evil demon	
(5)	I clearly and distinctly perceive that I cannot be fooled while I am having this intuition	<i>A</i> can indeed not be fooled while having this intuition	
(6)	I cannot even doubt the indoubtability of “sum”	<i>A</i> is clearly and distinctly perceiving his inability to doubt “sum”	“sum” is in fact indubitable (in itself), so <i>B</i> is right
(7)		<i>A</i> uncovered a hidden contradiction in the evil demon hypothesis	the evil demon hypothesis is not clear and distinct
(8)			<i>B</i> is not fooled, “cogito ergo sum” is clear and distinct (in itself)

Conclusion

There is an answer to the sceptical challenge.

