

Cartesian Skepticism and Epistemological Deontologism

Frode Alfson Bjørdal

Universitetet i Oslo

Abstract

Cartesian skepticism has its roots in classical skepticism and is geared to undermine our confidence even in immediate perceptual statements as 'I see things in front of me'. We investigate with some assumptions which have as consequence that Cartesian skepticism is avoided in some contexts. I assume that Gettier style difficulties are not engendered by immediate perceptual statements, and I invoke things in general to not make assumptions in the metaphysics of objects. As Gettier issues are side stepped for such statements as mentioned we have that I know that I see things in front of me if, and only if it is true that I see things in front of me, I am justified in believing that I see things in front of me and I believe that I see things in front of me. We assume epistemological deontologism, so that I am justified in believing something iff I am permitted to believe it. We assume Kant's Law so that 'ought' implies 'can'. As a matter of fact it is impossible for me to not believe that I see things in front of me; it follows by Kant's Law that it is not the case that it ought to be the case that I do not believe that I see things in front of me; so I am permitted to believe that I see things in front of me, thence by epistemic deontologism I am justified in believing that I see things in front of me. Even the skeptic may not reasonably deny that it is true that I see things in front of me, and the skeptic does also not deny that I believe that I see things in front of me. Given our assumption that Gettier style difficulties do not apply for immediate perceptual statements it follows that I know that I see things in front of me. Needless to say, but one may challenge some of the assumptions we made to reach an anti skeptical conclusion. One may also explore the viability of extending the approach we have put forth here, and it can be of interest to explore further consequences for epistemology in general.

The deontological conception of epistemic justification, e.g. in the version according to which a person is justified in holding p just in the case she is in some sense, normatively permitted to believe that p, has come under attack. According to William Alston, the major defect of epistemic deontologism is that it presupposes doxastic voluntarism, i.e. the view that we have direct voluntary control over whether to believe something or not. But Alston thinks that we have no such direct voluntary control, or rather that we only quite rarely have such control. And given this alleged failure of the prevalence of voluntary control, Alston maintains that "it is futile to discuss whether I am permitted to believe that p at t or whether I would be irresponsible in choosing to believe that p at t."

1 Physical necessity

We write $\spadesuit p$ for the idea that p is physically necessary, and $\clubsuit p$ is the dual idea that p is physically possible. Using \neg for negation, we have that $\clubsuit p \leftrightarrow \neg\spadesuit\neg p$. We do not provide a semantics for physical necessity, so this is left open.

2 Deontological Modalities

We write Op for the statement that p ought to be the case, and Pp for the dual statement that p is permitted. We have that $Pp \leftrightarrow \neg O\neg p$.

3 Belief and deontic justification

We write $B_S p$ for S believes that p .

Definition 0: Subject S is justified in believing proposition p just in case the subject is deontologically *permitted* to believe the proposition.

Formally:

$$JB_S p \leftrightarrow PB_S p$$

4 Ought implies can

The relation pointed to in the title of this section is also called Kant's Law, for reasons I do not know.

Formally: $Op \rightarrow \clubsuit p$

5 Doxastic application of Kant's Law

$$O\neg B_S p \rightarrow \clubsuit\neg B_S p$$

6 Compelling propositions

Definition 1: Proposition q is *compelling* for S just if $\spadesuit B_S q$.

Compelling matters

Theorem 0: Compelling propositions are justified

Proof: Suppose $\spadesuit B_S q$. By interdefinability of \spadesuit with \clubsuit it follows that $\neg\clubsuit\neg q$. By the *doxastic application* of **Kant's law** above we have $O\neg B_S p \rightarrow \clubsuit\neg B_S p$. So by *modus tollens* we have $\neg O\neg B_S q$. So by the interdefinability of the deontic operators we have $PB_S q$. So by Definition 0 we have that $JB_S q$.

7 Gettier-framed propositions

Definition 2: A proposition q is *Gettier-framed* for subject S iff S knows that q just if S believes that q , S ' belief that q is justified and q is true.

Proposition 0: Immediate sensory reports are Gettier-framed.

Example: I *know* that I see two hands in front of me iff I *believe* that I see two hands in front of me, it is *true* that I see two hands in front of me and I am *justified* in believing that I see two hands in front of me.

Formally for Gettier-framed q : $K_S q \leftrightarrow (JB_S q \wedge q \wedge B_S q)$

The justification of immediate sensory reports **Proposition 1:** Immediate sensory reports are compelling.

Theorem 1: Immediate sensory reports are justified.

Proof: From Proposition 1 and Theorem 0.

Perceptual and doxastic assumptions **Proposition 2:** I see two hands in front of me.

Proposition 3: I believe that I see two hands in front of me.

Dogmatic upshot

Theorem 2: *I know that I see two hands in front of me.*

Proof:

The statement that I see two hands in front of me is *compelling* by Proposition 1 as it is an immediate sensory report. So by Theorem 1 I am *justified* in believing that I see two hands in front of me.

By Proposition 0 the statement that I see two hands in front of me is Gettier-framed.

By Proposition 2 I do see two hands in front of me, and by Proposition 3 I believe that I see two hands in front of me.

Theorem 2 now follows by Definition 2 and Gettier-framing.

Inverting the Dream Argument

We write $K(\neg D)$ for I know that I am not dreaming, and $K(\Sigma 2)$ for I know that I see two hands in front of me.

A simple way to take the Cartesian Dream Argument in the contexts is to use the conditional $K(\Sigma 2) \rightarrow K(\neg D)$ and the statement $\neg K(\neg D)$ to infer $\neg K(\Sigma 2)$ by modus tollens.

Instead I accept $K(\Sigma 2) \rightarrow K(\neg D)$ and $K(\Sigma 2)$ and infer that $K(\neg D)$.

So I accept the conditional that I know that I am not awake if I know that I see two hands in front of me and I accept the statement that I know that I see two hands in front of me, so I infer by modus ponens that I know that I am not dreaming.

Concluding matters **Main result:** It was shown that given certain assumptions I know that I see two hands in front of me.

Directions:

- It may be of interest to extend the anti skeptical result and study its bearing upon epistemology generally.
- The account may assist in the articulation of more skeptical attitudes.
- Versions of epistemological deontologism have received independent attention in the modern literature, and the version of epistemological deontologism presupposed should be related to these discussions.