LEHRER’S SCEPTICAL HYPOTHESIS

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Keith Lehrer has constructed a new argument for the old thesis of Scepticism based on the related notions of knowledge, complete justification, and the possibility of being mistaken.[[1]](#endnote-1) I wish to argue here that Lehrer’s case for skepticism fails.

Lehrer’s case rests on the framing of an hypothesis which, if true, would raise the specter of possible error in every one of our beliefs: the existence of a group of creatures (Googols) in another galaxy who render our beliefs largely incorrect through a process of thought control. Given the intelligibility and consistency of this hypothesis, the following argument is presented to vindicate Scepticism:

(1) For any proposition ‘p’, we know that p only if we are completely justified in believing p.

(2) An hypothesis can be framed which, if true, would render our beliefs more often mistaken than correct (the ‘Sceptical Hypothesis’).

(3) No hypothesis should be rejected as unjustified without argument against it.

(4) There are no arguments against the Sceptical Hypothesis.

(5) The Sceptical Hypothesis should not be rejected as unjustified.

(6) We are completely justified in believing p only if those hypotheses which conflict with the belief are unjustified.

(7) The Sceptical Hypothesis conflicts with our belief that p.[[2]](#endnote-2)

(8) We are never completely justified in believing p.

(9) We never know p.

A recent critic has contended that asking us to give up our claims to knowledge on the basis of fanciful hypotheses like Lehrer’s simply runs counter to the ‘fact about the concept of knowledge’ that no such possibility creates a counter-presumption to a knowledge claim.[[3]](#endnote-3) Apart from the indecisiveness of simply stating putative ‘facts’ about the concept of knowledge, this line of criticism leaves Lehrer’s *argument* unchallenged, and in particular it ignores the crux of the issue: the conditions required for complete justification. Although one might wish to challenge Lehrer’s claims about knowledge and complete justification in premiss (1) or find grounds for viewing the Sceptical Hypothesis as, in some sense, unjustified [hence rejecting premiss (5)], the major weakness in Lehrer’s case is, in my view, premiss (6). To see why, we must specify (6) more precisely.

Lehrer speaks of conflicting hypotheses as ‘being unjustified,’ but this is unsatisfactory. His thesis cannot be merely that complete justification in believing p requires that potentially refuting hypotheses be unsupported by present evidence. If it were, then since the Sceptical Hypothesis is unsupported by present evidence (i.e. there is at present no positive reason to think it is true) the Sceptical Hypothesis would meet the condition stated in (6) and there would be no reason to deny that we are completely justified in believing p. To make the Sceptical Hypothesis potent, we must require that potentially refuting hypotheses actually have been shown to be without any foundation in fact. Since no argument of this sort has been (or is likely to be) presented against the existence of Googols, we thus fail to be completely justified in believing anything.

Is (6), so understood, true? Much turns upon explicating the notion of ‘complete justification,’ but even without questioning what is commonly held about its explication (by Lehrer and others) we can find good reason to reject (6). Lehrer gives no reason in support of (6), but this thesis, unlike ‘if a belief is true then those with which it conflicts are false’ is not obviously analytic. Can we *infer* from the fact that a belief is completely justified, that those potentially refuting hypotheses have been shown to be unfounded; indeed, could not both sides in a dispute be completely justified in their beliefs even if both cannot be right? Lehrer gives no reason to rule this out, and lacking this, the defense of Scepticism rests upon the empty and crucial assertion that the Sceptical Hypothesis, until refuted, rules out complete justification.

It is a fact about the way in which the concept of complete justification is often understood in the literature, that it is possible to be completely justified in believing p even when p is false.[[4]](#endnote-4) If this is assumed, (6) must be rejected, for since it is possible for a belief to be false and yet completely justified, we need only explain how the refuting hypothesis can itself be completely justified. The example made famous in discussion of Gettier type counter-examples is that of a man who believes (h) his friend, Mr. Nogot, owns a Ford (having just seen Nogot alight from a Ford, having been shown the certificate of ownership, and having been told by an honest and reliable Nogot that he owns the Ford. Here, Lehrer explains, ‘I would be completely justified in believing h (ibid, p. 169) even though Nogot, true to his name, doesn’t own the Ford. Since it is easy to imagine an explanation for the falsity of h, for which a man could possess completely justifying evidence (e.g. he knows Nogot to be the unwitting victim of a scheme to fool Nogot’s friends perpetrated by other men who have forged the certificate and cleverly persuaded Nogot that it was his Ford), it would be quite possible in this case for both sides of the dispute to be completely justified in their beliefs. *A fortiori*, a belief could be completely justified even when a conflicting hypothesis had not been shown to be unjustified, and (6) must be rejected.

This difficulty could be avoided if we give up the view that we can be completely justified in believing p when p is false. A plausible reason for making the truth of p a necessary condition for our being completely justified in believing p could be found if the events or states of affairs, the occurrence of which ‘makes p true,’ were a necessary causal condition for having the evidence which is sufficient to completely justify belief in p. Such causal conditions have been proposed and they may be vindicated, at least in a large class of cases. But it does not appear to work for all cases. Some of the things which we know to be true about the world, its past as well as its present, may be justified on the basis of very general evidence which does not obviously stem from the conditions which are sufficient for the truth of p. I can reasonably be said to know for example that Socrates is dead (or that he died a long time ago) not on the basis of testimony which goes back to eye witness reports of his death (though that too would be a way of having evidence for the belief) but simply from the fact that he lived 2000 years ago, and there is overwhelmingly good reason to believe that any man who lived in the 5th century B.C. is dead by the twentieth. Thus, there need be no causal link between the event of Socrates’ death and my possessing evidence which completely justifies me in believing that it occurred. We cannot in all cases then expect that the conditions which suffice to render p true will also be causal conditions for possessing completely justifying evidence, and hence we cannot on this basis restrict completely justified beliefs to the class of true ones.

Thus, we still have good reason to reject Lehrer’s contention in (6) that in order to be completely justified in believing p we must have shown conflicting hypotheses to be unfounded, and Lehrer’s case for Scepticism fails: the framing of the Googol hypothesis does not prevent us from being completely justified in believing p and, hence, from knowing p.

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1. ‘Why Not Scepticism?,’ *Philosophical Forum*, Vol. II, No. 3 (1971, ‘Knowledge). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Lehrer constructs the argument with respect to our common sense beliefs, but his remarks elsewhere make clear that the argument is to be generalized to include ‘belief about our conscious states, what we perceive by our senses, or recall from memory.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Richard Purtill, ‘Epistemological Scepticism Again,’ this journal, Vol. III, No. 1 (Fall, 1971). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Cf. Lehrer’s ‘Knowledge, Truth, and Evidence,’ *Analysis*, Vol. 25 (1965), p. 168: ‘a person may be completely justified in believing something which is in fact false’ and in Lehrer and Paxson, ‘Knowledge: Undefeated Justified True Belief,’ *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. LXVI, No. 8 (April, 1969), pp. 225-226. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)