Philosophy ONLINE

FEEDBACK | BROWSE | SAVED | LOGOUT | HOME

Search This Document

Front Matter

Contents

Symposium on

Jonathan Vogel Skepticism and Foundationalism: A Reply to Michael Williams

1. Skepticism and Foundationalism

2. More on Indistinguishability and Its Consequences

3. Contextualism and Epistemological Anti-Realism

4. Concluding Remark

Notes

Jonathan Vogel
Skepticism and Foundationalism: A Reply to Michael Williams
Journal of Philosophical Research
Volume 22- 1997 pp. 11 - 27

PDF not available | Print View

Jonathan Vogel
Skepticism and Foundationalism: A Reply to Michael Williams

AMHERST COLLEGE

ABSTRACT: Michael Williams maintains that skepticism about the external world is vitiated by a commitment to *foundationalism* and *epistemological realism*. (The latter is, approximately, the view that there is such a thing as knowledge of the external world in general, which the skeptic can take as a target.) I argue that skepticism is not encumbered in the ways Williams supposes. What matters, first of all, is that we can't *perceive* the difference between being in an ordinary environment and being in the sort of situation the skeptic describes (e.g. having one's brain manipulated by deceitful experimenters). This point can be upheld without embracing any substantial foundationalist tenet, such as the existence of basic beliefs, the availability of something "given," or the epistemic priority of experience. As to "epistemological realism," I find that Williams has offered no principled way to distinguish between ordinary challenges to knowledge and skeptical challenges which, supposedly, have no claim on our concern.

Michael Williams's *Unnatural Doubts* is a prodigious and probing work. In describing the project of his book, Williams writes: "My main concern is the relation between skepticism and foundationalism" (p. 114).[1] Williams believes that skeptical arguments presuppose, to their detriment, a commitment to foundationalism. I begin here by considering this thesis. Williams makes the related claim that skeptical arguments also presuppose, to their detriment, a doctrine he calls "epistemological realism." I discuss this claim and some associated issues in Section Three.

The present paper is based on a contribution to a recent symposium devoted to Williams's book.[2] I have attempted to take into account some remarks made by Williams on that occasion. In Section Two particularly, I

amplify what I said in Section One, and I indicate why I continue to regard Williams's treatment of certain topics as unsatisfactory.

1. Skepticism and Foundationalism

The skeptic argues that we lack knowledge of the external world because we can't rule out the possibility that we are victims of massive sensory deception. For example, suppose you believe that you are now in the library. How do you know that the inputs to your brain aren't being manipulated by scientists so that it appears to you as though you are in a library, even though you aren't? If you can't exclude this possibility, you don't know you're in a library. According to the skeptic, the same difficulty arises for the rest of your beliefs about the external world. The result is that you have no knowledge of the world at all.

It may seem essential to this argument that there is no difference between the experiences you would have if you were a brain-in-a-vat and the experiences you would have if you were in the library. That is why you don't know that you're really in the library. Now, the notion that our beliefs about the external world need to be confirmed by facts or beliefs about experience is the hallmark of a certain version of foundationalism. It might appear, then, that the argument for skepticism can be framed only if one adopts a foundationalist stance in the first place.

The term "foundationalism" covers a variety of related doctrines. It is important to distinguish three different theses that are typically associated with a foundationalist theory of justification or knowledge.[3] (1) *The existence of basic beliefs*. Some beliefs are justified, although they aren't justified by other beliefs. These special beliefs are said to be basic. (2) *The existence of the given*. We are immediately aware of some facts or things. Our beliefs about what is given in this way enjoy a special epistemic status—they are indubitable, incorrigible or something of the sort—and hence are basic. (3) *The epistemic priority of experience*. Beliefs about objects in the external world aren't basic. They are justified, if at all, by beliefs about the contents of one's experience.

I doubt whether a commitment to the existence of basic beliefs or to the existence of the given is relevant to the status of skepticism. The existence of basic beliefs isn't *sufficient* to generate skepticism. Foundationalists who take beliefs about the external world as basic will dismiss skeptical challenges with the wave of a hand. The existence of basic beliefs isn't *necessary* for the skeptic's purposes, either. An anti-foundationalist might deny that there are any basic beliefs, allowing that there are infinite or circular chains of justification. But if it happens that the justified beliefs in those chains have nothing to do with the external world, beliefs about the external world would be unjustified, just as the skeptic maintains. A further point follows immediately. If skepticism doesn't presuppose the existence of basic beliefs, it doesn't require the existence of anything given that would

give basic beliefs their status. So, the tenability of skepticism is independent of the existence of the given.

The issues of fundamental importance to Williams concern the third aspect of foundationalism, namely the thesis that beliefs about experience are epistemically prior to beliefs about the external world. "X is epistemically prior to y" means, at least to a first approximation, that the justification for y is derived from x, and not vice-versa.[4] The skeptic would apparently be assuming the epistemic priority of experience, if he argues that your acceptance of ordinary beliefs rather than the brain-in-a-vat hypothesis has to be justified by facts or beliefs about your experience. The foundationalist presupposition here is that beliefs about the external world require support from beliefs about experience in the first place.[5]

However, some caution is in order at this point, as Williams advises. The doctrine that beliefs about experience are epistemically prior to beliefs about the world may be invariably associated with skepticism. Or, perhaps, this aspect of foundationalism provides a natural setting for skeptical arguments. Still, this is not yet to establish that skepticism depends upon an antecedent commitment to the epistemic priority of experience as such. Williams, following Barry Stroud, makes an important distinction between foundationalism (i.e. the epistemic priority of experience) as a "presupposition" and foundationalism as a "by-product." The skeptic treats foundationalism as a presupposition if he simply assumes the epistemic priority of experience in trying to motivate his position. However, there is an alternative:

> He (the skeptic) does not...simply help himself to the appropriate relations of epistemological priority: he argues for them. More precisely, the suggestion on the part of the sceptic (or traditional epistemologist) is that, in the course of a distinctive kind of examination of our knowledge of the world...seemingly harmless considerations, truisms even, force this realization upon us. The epistemological hierarchy characteristic of foundational theories of knowledge and justification, which makes experiential knowledge in some quite general way epistemologically prior to knowledge of the world, emerges as a by-product of the fundamental motives for scepticism. (p. 57-8).

That is, "harmless considerations" or "truisms" are supposed to create the problem of skepticism in the first place; the thesis that knowledge of experience is prior to knowledge of the external world emerges afterwards. For example, one might introduce the doctrine of epistemic priority as part of a solution to the problem of skepticism, once that problem has already been broached. Faced with skeptical arguments, we undertake the project of isolating a body of prior, relatively unproblematic knowledge—knowledge of experience—which can then serve as a basis for knowledge of the world. Here, the *anti-skeptic* is committed to the epistemic priority of experience, not the skeptic. So, we shall have to see whether the doctrine of

epistemic priority is a really a presupposition of skepticism, rather than a by-product.

But, first, we ought to consider why it would be a mistake for the skeptic to take the priority of experience as unproblematic. One objection Williams raises is that reliance on the doctrine of epistemic priority will make

skeptical arguments circular. He seems to assume that a proposition about x is epistemically prior to a proposition about y only if the former is *more certain* than the latter (p. 58). Thus:

> Attempts to establish the intrinsic epistemological priority of experiential knowledge on the basis of the greater intrinsic dubitability of objective knowledge are question-begging. The only reason for thinking that such knowledge is intrinsically more dubitable is provided by the existence of sceptical arguments which, when unpacked, turn out to take the doctrine of the priority of experiential knowledge for granted. (p. 126).

This assessment seems doubtful to me, because I question the characterization of epistemic priority Williams provides. Someone might justifiably believe that Gettier is in Massachusetts, and on that basis conclude that either Gettier is in Massachusetts or he is in New York. I take it that the belief in the disjunction is *at least* as certain as belief in its disjuncts, even though belief in one of the disjuncts is epistemically prior to belief in the disjunction.[6] So, it is not true in general that epistemically prior beliefs are more certain than the beliefs they support. Of course, this criticism doesn't establish that beliefs about experience *are* epistemically prior to beliefs about the external world. But we do have reason to deny Williams's claim that the skeptic would simply beg the question by assuming that such a relation of priority exists.

There is, though, another reason why assuming the priority of experience might be problematic as a starting point for the Deceiver Argument. If the doctrine of epistemic priority is correct, knowledge of the external world isn't immediate, but rather depends upon an inference from the character of one's sensory experience. On the face of it, then, the doctrine of epistemic priority involves a commitment to the representational theory of perception. Since such a commitment is both substantial and controversial, the skeptic would be well-advised to avoid it, if possible.[7]

The alternative to the representational theory would be some version of direct realism. Direct realist theories might differ from a representational theory in at least three ways. First, the direct realist may deny the very *existence* of special mental entities or states that might be called "sensations" or "sensory experiences." Second, the direct realist may allow the existence of such items, but deny that they have any role in *causing* our beliefs about the external world. Finally, the direct realist may allow that our beliefs about the world are caused by our sensory experiences, but deny

— 15 —

that we *infer* how the world is from beliefs about the character of those experiences. Direct realism, at least in its extreme form, is inconsistent with the doctrine of epistemic priority. If there isn't *any such thing* as sensory experience, beliefs about sensory experience couldn't possibly provide justification for our beliefs about the external world.

The question now is whether the skeptical argument can be formulated on the basis of "seemingly harmless considerations" and "truisms," without making problematic assumptions concerning the epistemic priority of experience. More particularly, we want to see whether the skeptic can construct an argument that doesn't simply assume from the start that direct realism is false. For the purposes of discussion, let us then accept the following stipulations about perceptual knowledge: Perception gives rise immediately to beliefs about one's environment. The perceptual process doesn't produce sensations or sensory experiences as anything distinct from the perceptual beliefs themselves. Those beliefs are *a fortiori* not justified inferentially (or in any other way) by the character of one's sensations or sensory experiences. To grant all this is to assume an extreme form of direct realism, and to reject the doctrine of epistemic priority.

I claim that it is consistent with these admissions that you should find yourself in the following situation.[8] There are two identical twins, Homer and Rex, who are visually indistinguishable to you. You see Homer, but because Rex looks just like him, you don't have perceptual knowledge that Homer is before you.[9] The skeptic will try to assimilate his far-reaching difficulties about knowledge to this everyday situation. He will argue that being in Homer's presence and being in the presence of a suitably rigged computer are indistinguishable to you, just as the presence of Homer and the presence of Rex are. Hence, you don't know *by perception* that you are in the presence of Homer instead of the computer. Then, unless your belief that you are in Homer's presence is shored up in some other way,[10] the skeptic's full conclusion will follow: you don't know you are in Homer's presence at all.

What is crucial is that the skeptic can proceed up to this point without mobilizing a full-blown doctrine of the epistemic priority of experience. What is needed is just the principle that *if x and y are indistinguishable to you, then you can't know by perception that (you are confronted with) x and not y.*[11]

Of course, the skeptic's appeal to indistinguishability considerations will immediately raise some objections. First, one might challenge the skeptical claim that encountering Homer in real life is indistinguishable from an encounter with the deceptive computer. This challenge may be framed as a dilemma concerning the way we are to understand indistinguishability. On the one hand, we can treat indistinguishability as analyzable in terms of sensory experience: x and y are indistinguishable to you just in case they produce identical experiences in you. When the skeptic says that Homer and the nefariously rigged computer are indistinguishable to you, she is to

— 16 —

be understood as claiming that Homer and such a computer would cause you to have identical sensory experiences. However, this reference to experience violates our previous stipulations about perceptual knowledge, and perhaps involves some commitment on the skeptic's part to the epistemic priority of experience.[12]

Apparently, the alternative way to understand indistinguishability would be to analyze it directly in terms of perceptual knowledge: x and y are indistinguishable to you just in case you can't know by perception that (you are confronted with) x and not y, or vice-versa. But if this gloss is right, the skeptic's claim that Homer and the computer are indistinguishable to you amounts to the claim that you can't know by perception that you have encountered Homer instead of the computer. And to say this is just to assume what needed to be shown.

Now, the skeptic may reject the dilemma I have just set out. She might simply take it as a fact that Homer would be indistinguishable to you from a Homer-simulating computer. After all, how *would* you distinguish between them? The skeptic will then deny that it is incumbent upon her to say anything more about how this indistinguishability is ultimately to be analyzed or understood. At this point, the objection under consideration seems inconclusive, having led to an unsatisfying dispute about exactly what burden the skeptic bears.

But the skeptic might also be in a position to offer a stronger reply. Regardless of what theory of perception we adopt, we must be able to make and maintain certain kinds of indistinguishability claims. For instance, no one ought to deny that Homer and a molecule-for-molecule replica of him would be indistinguishable to you. And it seems that we can properly go on and say that if something affects your visual system exactly the way Homer does (it produces the same retinal image, or the same pattern of activity in the optic nerve), it is for you visually indistinguishable from Homer. This way of talking about effects on the visual system doesn't even *mention* experience, and so doesn't violate in any way the stipulations about perception laid down above. Accordingly, the skeptic may fairly say that the presence of the computer and the presence of Homer would be indistinguishable to you, because the computer would, by hypothesis, affect your sensory system just the way Homer does.[13]

The second criticism I want to address focuses on the principle that if x and y are indistinguishable to you, then you can't know by perception that (you are confronted with) x and not y. The skeptic apparently takes the variable "y" to range over *all* merely possible entities (or, perhaps, merely possible states of affairs). The criticism is that the principle so understood is too strong: to know x by perception requires only that you be able to distinguish between x and *some* alternatives to x. These may be called the relevant alternatives to x. It doesn't matter if there are other, *irrelevant* alternatives you can't distinguish from x. You can still know that you are confronted with x all the same.

— 17 —

Many people think that this moral is just the one we should draw from the well-known example of Henry and the fake barns, discussed by Alvin Goldman. If Henry stops by the road, and sees a barn, he may well know by perception that there is a barn where he is looking. This will be so, even if there happen to be barn facsimiles (say, movie sets) that Henry can't distinguish from real barns. So long as those facsimiles are rare and far away, the possibility that what Henry sees is just a barn-replica is irrelevant. Henry can still know by perception that he is in the presence of a barn. That is to say, Henry knows by perception that he is confronted with x, despite the fact that there is a y that is, for him, indistinguishable from x. The skeptic's version of the indistinguishability principle is therefore too demanding.[14]

I don't think that a relevant alternatives account of knowledge provides an adequate answer to skepticism, for reasons I have gone into elsewhere.[15] Suppose for now, though, that the objection just sketched is right as it stands. The skeptic's error lies in her assumption that knowing x by perception requires us to be able to distinguish between x and *any alternative whatsoever* (including skeptical alternatives that are supposedly irrelevant). However, this is not to say that the skeptic has gone wrong by assuming *foundationalism*. The skeptic and the relevant alternatives theorist may debate whether all, or only some, alternatives should be considered relevant when we assess whether someone knows by perception. That dispute, though, can be conducted in purely non-foundationalist terms; it could perfectly well take place within a setting that assumes the extreme direct realist account of perception described above. Thus, the claim that the Deceiver Argument essentially depends upon a problematic doctrine about the epistemic priority of experience seems questionable at best.[16]

2. More on Indistinguishability and Its Consequences

Williams has maintained that the skeptic can't rely on indistinguishability considerations in the way I have described. Williams believes that his discussion of Thompson Clarke's airplane-spotter case shows why this is so.[17] Clarke describes a situation in which:

> Pilots are being taught to identify enemy aircraft. Ten kinds of enemy aircraft, A, B,... J, are characterized in terms of their capabilities and mutually distinguishing features. The pilots are instructed to identify *any*

> enemy aircraft by running through a provided checklist of features. It is recognized that this may result in misidentifications: there are types of enemy aircraft, antiquated, rarely used, intentionally not covered by the checklist, which specifies features sufficient for distinguishing the ten types from one another but none from X, Y, Z, the antiquated types which the pilots are instructed to ignore. This procedure is adopted for certain overriding practical advantages.[18]

— 18 —

Imagine that a pilot, going by the manual, identifies an enemy plane as an A, but there are in fact "antiquated, rarely used" planes of a different type that share the features of A specified in the manual. Still, it happens that the plane sighted by the pilot is in fact an A. One might claim that, under these circumstances, the pilot knows the plane is an A; the possibility that the plane is of a different type too slight or remote to matter.

I will grant all this for now. The question I wish to raise concerns what the pilot has reason to believe. Suppose, contrary to what Clarke seems to suggest, the pilot is told that the classification in the manual is exhaustive. Then, he does have reason to believe that what he sees isn't a plane of some other kind that is indistinguishable from a plane of type A. Alternatively, suppose that the pilot is aware of the manual's shortcomings. He still knows that virtually all the planes with A-like features are A's, and so he has strong evidence against the possibility that the plane he sees looks like an A, but isn't one. In either case, the pilot has some reason to think that a plane that has A-like features is (or is very likely to be) a plane of type A, rather than a plane of some other kind that is indistinguishable from planes of type A. In this respect, the skeptic will say, our situation vis-a-vis skeptical alternatives differs from that of the airplane spotters. The skeptic holds that we have *no reason at all* for believing that we aren't victims of massive sensory deception.

Williams seems to appreciate this point about Clarke's example, but I can't agree with some of the conclusions Williams proceeds to draw. He writes:

> We can make the same point by asking how the case of the spotters would have to be modified in order to make it truly analogous to our epistemic situation as the radical sceptic conceives it. What we must do is insulate the spotters from any knowledge of the relative frequencies with which different types of aircraft fly over. Whereas Clarke's spotters are pilots flying hither and thither, we must imagine them confined to an observation post, using instruments perhaps, but at any rate given no feedback on their success rate. They must never be told and never observe whether an aircraft they have identified as hostile takes hostile action...Should they become aware of their position, the only reasonable attitude for them to take towards their "knowledge" of aircraft would be radical skepticism.
> Notice, however, what we have done to make the analogy work. We have placed the spotters under a permanent epistemic limitation. Epistemologically speaking, we have cut their world in two. We have imposed an unbridgeable gulf between what they can detect from their observation post and what they would like to know about the outside world. By so doing, and only by so doing, we imagine them placed in a situation in which they cannot have the slightest reason, with respect to a certain body of possible claims, for accepting one rather than

— 19 —

> another. Equally, only if a generalized form of such an epistemic gulf is intrinsic to the human condition will there be a threat of radical scepticism with respect to our knowledge of the world (pp. 209-210).

Williams claims further that to posit such a "gulf" is to assume the epistemological priority of experience, or at least "a final order of epistemological priority" (p. 210).

I think that Williams's analysis goes wrong in several ways. In the first place, one might well say that we do labor under a "permanent epistemological limitation" insofar as we can't distinguish certain possibilities from others by perception. That *is* a feature of the human condition. Consider the fact that blood samples of different types are visually indistinguishable to us. Consequently, we can't tell what type of blood somebody has by looking at it, no matter how good our eyes are or how much training we've received. In the same way, a situation in which you are, e.g., really in the library is indistinguishable from a situation in which your brain is being stimulated in an identical fashion by some computer. Consequently, you can't tell by seeing whether you're a brain-in-a-vat.

What really seems to trouble Williams is the idea that there is some body of evidence which underdetermines the choice between the propositions we ordinarily believe and skeptical hypotheses. According to Williams, such a view sets up an "epistemic gulf" between what we ordinarily believe and our evidence for it, so that "epistemologically speaking,...(our) world is cut in two." Williams apparently assumes that the evidence in question would have to be beliefs or propositions about the character of one's sensory experience:

> The only way in which I can't tell that I am not a brain in a vat is that my experience could be just the way it is even if I were. My situation and the brain's would be just the same from the 'inside.' But...knowledge does not stand or fall with such internal factors. (p. 327, see p. 209).

So, Williams holds, the claim that we have no reason to believe that we aren't brains-in-vats ultimately presupposes foundationalism, i.e. the epistemological priority of experience.

By now, though, it should be apparent why I think we shouldn't follow Williams here. Without assuming foundationalism, the skeptic can maintain that, e.g., really being in the library and being a brain-in-a-vat are situations that are indistinguishable to us (in the sense I have described above). It follows that you can't tell by perception that you're in the library and not the victim of massive sensory deception. Whether indistinguishability is to be explained by positing type-identical experiences isn't essential to the skeptic's position.

Now, this argument establishes at most that we don't know by perception that skeptical hypotheses are false. Could we know the falsity of these

— 20 —

hypotheses in some other way? One possibility might be that I could infer that I'm not a brain-in-a-vat from some other proposition I am in a position to know, like 'I have a hand.'[19] I myself have little hope that this Moorean approach can succeed, but I won't enter into this matter here.[20]

Alternatively, Williams suggests that believing you aren't a brain-in-a-vat is a necessary condition for conducting certain kinds of inquiries; you presume you're not a brain-in-a-vat when you check whether there's milk in the refrigerator, when you ask for directions, and so on. Williams calls such presuppositions of inquiry "methodological necessities" (p. 123). A belief that is functioning as a methodological necessity counts as knowledge, if it is true.[21] So, when we check to see what's in the refrigerator or we ask directions, we can be said to know that we aren't brains-in-vats (p. 130).

Again, I won't examine this proposal in detail, although I do have some qualms about it. Here is an example that suggests, somewhat roughly, what troubles me. Imagine that, in order to make progress in the development of some theory, physicists have to assume without proof that a certain mathematical series converges. Using Williams's terminology, we might say the belief that the series behaves this way is a methodological necessity for research in the field. Sometime later, we may suppose, a mathematician succeeds in proving that the series converges. I would be reluctant to say that, before the proof was obtained, the physicists *knew* that the series converges, simply because a belief to that effect was a methodological necessity for the inquiry they were conducting. If, in general, methodological necessity doesn't confer the status of knowledge on a belief, the fact that we must assume the falsity of skeptical hypotheses in order to engage in various inquiries will cut no ice against the skeptic.

My main point, though, is that the skeptical challenge can be mounted without making any initial commitment to foundationalism: The skeptic maintains that we have no knowledge of the external world because we don't know that one or another skeptical hypothesis is false. In particular, knowledge that skeptical hypotheses are false can't be obtained by perception—we can't see that we aren't brains-in-a-vat.[22] The skeptic's argument for this point can rely on the Indistinguishability Principle, and need not invoke the epistemic priority of experience.

3. Contextualism and Epistemological Anti-Realism

As part of his fundamental critique of skepticism, Williams embraces a version of "contextualism" about knowledge: "the same belief can be a fixed point at one time, or in one particular context of inquiry or justification, but a candidate for justification at another time or in another context" (115). Moreover, "the epistemic status of a given proposition is liable to shift with situational, disciplinary and other contextually variable factors" (119). What counts as knowledge, then, is determined by context, and a crucial part of the context is the nature of the inquiry one is conducting. For

— 21 —

example, suppose I want to know how much gas is in my car's fuel tank. It's sufficient for me to look at the gauge on my dashboard, so long as the gauge is, in fact, reliable. But if I want to know whether the gauge is reliable, that is a different inquiry, and I may need to examine the gauge directly or to check it in various other ways.

Williams's key claim is that inquiries vary according to which beliefs they hold fixed and which beliefs they put under scrutiny. In other words, one inquiry may differ from another in the way it partitions beliefs into "problematic" and "privileged" classes. When I want to know how much gas is in my car's tank, I hold fixed things like 'I have a car,' 'If the gauge says "F," the tank is full,' and much else besides. On the other hand, when I am concerned about the reliability of the gauge itself, the belief 'If the gauge says "F," the tank is full' passes from the privileged to the problematic class.

According to Williams, the question whether we have any knowledge about the external world arises in a particular context:

> Sceptical arguments *begin* by partitioning propositions into privileged and problematic classes. Propositions in the (at least relatively) privileged class are taken to provide the (ultimate) evidence for those in the problematic class and sceptical arguments challenge us to explain how they manage to do this. (p. 52).[23]

That is, the epistemologist insists on placing all beliefs about the external world in a single problematic class. But this is at best an optional exercise that one need not undertake. If it turns out that there is no way to redeem beliefs in the problematic class on the basis of what is left over, that result may disappoint the epistemologist. However, if contextualism is right, the epistemologist's failure needn't have any bearing on the epistemic status our beliefs have when we aren't engaged in *specifically epistemological* inquiry. Even if you wind up with skepticism in the philosophy study, that doesn't affect whether you have or lack knowledge "in the street."

A yet more pointed claim could be made. Williams upholds a doctrine he calls epistemological anti-realism. One aspect of this doctrine is that there is no such thing as "knowledge of the external world as a *kind* of knowledge, which we might assess or explain as a whole" (p. xii). In this respect, the category of knowledge of the external world is really worse off than knowledge about your car's fuel supply, which presumably is a genuine sort of knowledge.[24] It would follow that the traditional epistemologist's question whether I have any knowledge of the external world is vacuous or ill-posed. Asking whether we have any knowledge of the external world is something like asking how many humors the body has. From this standpoint, epistemology is not even so much as one legitimate inquiry among others. There is knowledge in the street and nothing more than outmoded pseudo-science in the study.[25]

— 22 —

In any event, Williams means to impose a double burden on the epistemologist (p. 101). The first demand is to explain how the outcome of the epistemologist's inquiry could have the over-arching significance claimed for it. If the epistemologist partitions beliefs in a particular way, and finds that the beliefs placed in the problematic class remain so, why should that result impugn or discredit the possibility of knowledge in *other* contexts of inquiry? The second part of the burden is to show that the category of "knowledge of the external world" has a certain kind of integrity, "analogous to" that of a natural kind (p. 222-3). What could beliefs about, e.g., theoretical physics, the contents of your medicine cabinet, and someone else's preferences in music have in common, such that they could stand or fall together as knowledge from *any* point of view?

Let me sketch a response to this two-fold criticism. To begin, it should be borne in mind that the outcome of one inquiry can perfectly well have consequences for the possibility of success in other inquiries. Williams seems to agree that one may be pressed to engage in wider or more fundamental investigations, on which the success of other inquiries does in fact depend:

> Challenged on the truth of a given belief, I can appeal to my own experience, to the testimony of others, to whatever tests, experiments or investigations I or other people have carried out, and so on. Should the evidential value—the truth-conduciveness—of whatever I cite itself come under suspicion, we have a further matter for empirical investigation. (p. 291).

For example, if you want to know when the next train leaves for New York, you might look at a railroad schedule. However, you won't have good reason to believe that the train departs at the hour listed in the schedule unless you have some assurance that the schedule up-to-date. (If you don't already have some reason to think that your timetable is currently valid, you'd better check). Certainly, the fact that you are inquiring about train times doesn't put questions about the accuracy of the schedule out of bounds. Contextualism, and the nonchalance it affords, has some limits.

Williams may not wish to contest this point. As he sees things, an epistemologist who questions the status of perceptual knowledge *in general* isn't engaging in a legitimate extension of an ordinary procedure. Trying to quell skeptical doubts is not like considering whether the train schedule you're consulting is current:

> BonJour and any who think like him hint that their "global" questions are simply more general than the "local" questions that concern us in everyday life. This is what I deny. The "global" question that animates traditional epistemology derives its content from its own characteristic presuppositions... (namely) foundationalism and epistemological realism. (p. 292).

— 23 —

The epistemologist's "realist" presupposition is that our beliefs about the external world constitute a body that is subject to examination or assessment:

> Descartes ties his pre-critical beliefs together as an object of theoretical inquiry, by tracing them all to "the senses." No matter how topically heterogeneous, and no matter how unsystematic, his beliefs have this much in common: all owe their place to the authority of the senses. If this authority can be called in question, each loses its title to the rank of knowledge. We have seen that this talk of "the senses" is

> poised between a causal truism and a contentious epistemological doctrine. (p. 104).

How so?

> In a nutshell, the point is this: that, *a priori*, there is no reason to think that there is any single answer to the question "What information do we get from the senses?" The answer might just be: it depends on the circumstances—for example the state of the environment and the state of the perceiver (including his background knowledge). The uncontroversial fact that, without functioning sense organs, it would be difficult or impossible to learn anything about one's surroundings does not imply that there is some proprietary brand of "information" that it is the special office of "the senses" to transmit...To suppose that it does is to graft a contentious epistemological doctrine on to a causal truism. (p. 72-3).

In the face of this criticism, the skeptic might do best to challenge the separation between epistemic and causal considerations Williams seems to insist on. Another example may help to illustrate the point. Imagine that the quality-control department of Wontell, a major computer chip manufacturer, discovers that the chips they have manufactured and shipped over the past time period have a serious defect. Sunspot activity interferes with their operation, so that everything built with a Wontell chip is likely to malfunction if sunspots become intense. Contrary to the company's usual policy, Wontell announces the problem. Now, imagine further that Wontell chips are used in devices of every kind—computers at the Bureau of Labor Statistics, sensors for car engines, satellites that collect astronomical data, medical equipment, and so forth. I think that, under such circumstances, beliefs that are topically highly diverse (beliefs about the nation's economy, car engines, astronomy, the state of a patient's health) will all suffer in their epistemic status. For example, a doctor using an instrument with a Wontell component won't be able to trust the read-out of the machine which says that her patient's white-cell count is normal; the computer chip problem prevents the doctor from knowing that the blood count is normal, even if it is. Moreover, the doctor is not in a position to insist that she is doing medicine rather than electronics, and to continue relying on the blood-analyzer

---

— 24 —

with the Wontell chip. Participants in an indefinitely wide range of particular inquiries will be thwarted by the fact that their devices may be malfunctioning due to the vulnerability of the computer chips.

This story suggests that there is something amiss in Williams's critical discussion of "knowledge by the senses." In the case just described, there is no single answer to the question "What information do we get from Wontell computer chips?" It does depend on circumstances. And the things people know by using Wontell computer chips may not in any way resemble a natural kind. Nevertheless, there are a lot of things people will *not* know if the chips are subject to interference from sunspots. The *causal* role of the computer chips in forming our beliefs gives questions about the functioning of those chips wide *epistemic* significance.

Of course, the possibility of an epistemic bottleneck due to defective computer chips is meant to parallel the skeptical concern that our sensory mechanisms may be malfunctioning or interfered with by a deceiver.[26] We would be wrong about many things if sunspots were affecting the computer chips, and matters would be even worse if a neurophysiologist were feeding delusory inputs to our nervous systems. The possibility of this sort of error opens up because of the fact that our beliefs about the world are the result of certain causal processes, and the fact that any given effect can come about in more than one way.

The skeptic, then, may respond to Williams as follows: She does not illegitimately conflate a "causal truism" with "a contentious epistemological doctrine." Causal facts can have far-reaching implications for what we know and don't know, as the example of the computer chips illustrates. Moreover, the skeptic can make this point—and proceed with her argument—without supposing that our beliefs about the external world constitute something "analogous to" a natural kind.[27] Thus, I believe Williams is wrong to say that familiar skeptical arguments are vitiated by a commitment to the doctrine he calls "epistemological realism."[28]

4. Concluding Remark

I have dissented from what I take to be two of Williams's central claims in *Unnatural Doubts*, namely that skeptical arguments presuppose foundationalism and that they presuppose an illegitimate form of "epistemological realism." Still, *Unnatural Doubts* is far-ranging and challenging book, and there is a great deal of interest in it that I haven't even touched upon here.

Notes

[1] Michael Williams, *Unnatural Doubts* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991). All parenthetical citations that follow are to this work.

[2] Held at the A.P.A. Central Division meeting in April, 1995.

[3] I switch between talking about foundationalism as a theory concerning the structure of knowledge and talking about it as a theory concerning the structure of justification. These are distinct positions, to be sure. However, to observe the difference would make contact with Williams's text much more difficult, and greatly encumber my exposition of the issues. I don't think that any confusion should result from the practice I follow.

[4] The notion of epistemic priority resists successful analysis. It can't be straightforwardly explicated in terms of entailment, counterfactual, or causal relations. Presumably, it is closely related to the basing relation, which is also difficult to spell out. Williams specifies what he takes to be a necessary condition for x to be epistemically prior to y, which I discuss below. One further point: As a matter of convenience, I talk about epistemic priority sometimes as a relation between justified beliefs, and sometimes as a relation between propositions known. The difference could be significant in certain contexts, but not here, I think.

[5] Williams emphasizes that we must be attentive to the difference between the epistemic priority of experience and some other theses which aren't in dispute. Williams is willing to grant, at least temporarily, what he calls the *neutrality* of experience: no set of truths about experience entails any facts about the external world (p. 73). Williams will also concede, perhaps, the *autonomy* of experience: "it is possible to have experiential knowledge without having any objective knowledge, but not the other way around" (p. 77). Neither of these amounts to the doctrine of the epistemic priority of experience as such.

[6] See I. T. Oakley, "An Argument For Skepticism Concerning Justified Beliefs," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 13 (1976), p. 221. The point holds for any belief that is derived from another by deduction.

[7] I am indebted here, and elsewhere, to Gideon Rosen.

[8] If there is an inconsistency, we need to withdraw some of the admissions, since the sort of situation I will describe certainly does come about.

[9] Perhaps you do know that either Homer *or* Rex is in your vicinity, and this would be perceptual knowledge meeting the conditions just set forth. In any case, we may be tempted to explain why Homer and Rex are indistinguishable to you by *positing* some sensory intermediary (sense experience) that occurs when you see them, and that is qualitatively identical regardless of which one you see. See below.

[10] See Section Two for a brief discussion of this possibility.

[11] I'm not being fussy about whether the values for x and y are individuals or states of affairs; I don't think it matters to the argument. The role of indistinguishability considerations in skeptical arguments has been stressed by Colin Mc Ginn. See Mc Ginn, "The Concept of Knowledge" in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy V: Studies in Epistemology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980).

[12] Williams writes: "The only way in which I can't tell that I am not a brain in a vat is that my experience could be just the way it is even if I were. My situation and the brain's would be just the same 'from the inside.' But...knowledge does not stand

or fall with such internal factors." (p. 327). David Armstrong, who certainly rejects the epistemic priority of experience, thinks that his direct realism allows for (highly derived) talk about sense-impressions, and presumably about the sameness of sense-impressions. See D. M. Armstrong, *Perception and the Physical World* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), pp. 127-28. It's not clear, then, that the criticism I am considering poses a problem for the skeptic in any case.

[13] The controversy might not end at this point. J. L. Austin famously denied that the states of dreaming x and perceiving x would be indistinguishable, and G. E. Moore, more minimally, denied that the skeptic is entitled to claim that they are. More recently, Hilary Putnam, Tyler Burge and others have defended views that would undermine the skeptic's claim that (being in the presence of) Homer and (being hooked up to) the computer are indistinguishable to you. According to Burge's theory of content, the beliefs and experiences and these situations would create in you are different; furthermore, when you're perceiving Homer, you know you're perceiving Homer, and when you're perceiving (?) the computer, you know you're perceiving the computer. Still, it's a somewhat delicate question whether you have the ability to distinguish the one from the other.

[14] Alvin Goldman, "Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge," reprinted in *Essays On Knowledge and Justification*, ed. G. Pappas and M. Swain (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), pp. 121-22. I am indebted here, as elsewhere, to Jonathan Adler.

[15] See my "Are There Counterexamples to the Closure Principle?" in *Doubting: Contemporary Perspectives On Skepticism*, ed. G. Ross and M. Roth (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1990) and my *Skepticism and Knowledge of the External World* (in preparation).

[16] In his Chapter Eight, Williams is generally critical of the relevant alternatives approach, especially in the form advanced by Fred Dretske. Williams assumes that such an approach requires one to abandon the Closure Principle, but some relevant alternative theorists, notably Gail Stine and Stewart Cohen, embrace closure.

© Copyright 2008 Philosophy Online. All Rights Reserved.

Philosophy Online has been jointly developed by the Philosophy Documentation Center and InteLex Corporation as an electronic platform for fulltext and bibliographic resources in philosophy. More information about the project will be made available as new functionality is implemented.