An Overview of Skeptical Worries: The Gettier Problem, Agrippa's Trilemma, and the Brain-in-a-Vat

ANDREW NESSELER

University of Wales Trinity Saint David South West Wales, United Kingdom
Email: 2236167@student.uwtsd.ac.uk

Here I will explore through a literature review three important but different ways in which skepticism has been developed. The first is that of the Gettier problem and its potentially skeptical implications for knowledge. The second is Agrippa's Trilemma, in which the non-skeptic ostensibly struggles to develop a satisfactory account of epistemic justification. Third and lastly, there are brain-in-a-vat scenarios, as one attempts to meet the skeptic's challenge of having knowledge of the external world. I conclude that the above are important challenges while still maintaining that the non-skeptic has formulated responses worth our consideration.

Keywords: skepticism, the Gettier problem, Agrippa's trilemma, justification

INTRODUCTION

In providing a defense of knowledge that overcomes skeptical worries, philosophers have addressed the following problems. First, whether the traditional account of knowledge succeeds. This first problem will largely concern the Gettier problem, in which the view of knowledge as justified true belief is put into doubt. Second, how we should understand justification. On this point, we will look at a few of the competing views of justification (e.g. foundationalism, coherentism and infinitism) and see their implications. Third and lastly, whether it is possible to have knowledge of an external world. Here we will see the most focused worries of the skeptic, who may go so far as to deny knowledge of one's own physical existence.

Some recent work on skepticism has lamented its treatment in epistemology. More specifically, there is concern that skepticism has been deemed not worthy of serious endorsement but, instead, relegated to 'forensic interest at most' (Hetherington, Macarthur 2022: 2). To help amend this, my intention here is to give a fair showing of skeptical worries and the non-skeptic's position without treating either view as inert. Granted, views such as skepticism of the external world still receive attention and potential refutations on the grounds of common sense or ordinary beliefs. For example, Adam Leite (2024) builds off G. E. Moore's refutation of external world skepticism, in which there is a reluctance to engage the skeptic in grand epistemological theorising. The use of Moore, however, should be unsurprising, as skepticism's history can be traced back to the Pyrrhonian skeptics and, arguably, similar forms

of this skepticism were later addressed by René Descartes (Gail Fine 2021). The takeaway being that skepticism has persisted, and we continue to see similar debates between the skeptic and non-skeptic.

While not exhaustive, the above shows the different ways in which knowledge has been scrutinized in analytic philosophy and epistemology more specifically. However, I will also show some of the thoughtful ways in which non-skeptics have responded to these challenges. Through a literature review, then, I will give an overview of these problems, but, before attempting to do so, I will briefly explore some of the historical backing and define skepticism.

SKEPTICISM

Broadly speaking, 'skeptical arguments in philosophy typically purport to show that we do not know or are not justified in believing many of the things we ordinarily assume we know or reasonably believe' (Lemos 2007: 131). For example, we may talk of moral skeptics, who hold that 'we have no moral knowledge' (Brink 1984: 111). Yet, grander in scope we have global skepticism, which claims that no belief is justified (Gallois 1993: 36). A view more precise, while following from global skepticism, is skepticism toward knowledge of the external world, with such skeptical worries famously expressed (and attempted to be overcome) by Descartes in *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641/1996).

Yet, before Descartes, we can see skepticism in 'ancient Greek thought, [with] the most famous being Sextus Empiricus, a Pyrrhonian sceptic who lived (probably) in the second or third century CE' (Miller 2022: 28). Pyrrhonian skepticism, however, does not neatly fall under the global skepticism camp, as 'Many people ... would deny that Pyrrhonean scepticism even purports to be a form of global scepticism about rationally justified belief' (Bailey 2002: 16). In the case of Sextus Empiricus, for example, the skeptic may be described as still pursuing truth as opposed to claiming the impossibility of knowledge (Bett 2019: 7).

So, one might ask why we should be tempted by skepticism. I believe the next few sections will help explain the motivation, but there are other reasons which might give life to the view. One worth mentioning is the disconnect between the mind and objective reality. The problem here could be labelled as the 'veil of perception' where 'we do not have direct unvarnished access to the world, but instead have an access that is mediated by sensory appearances ...' (Lyons 2023).

This problem may traditionally be associated with the idealist George Berkeley, but it also reaches Immanuel Kant. The worry of skepticism from Kant's philosophy may be unexpected, but, whether fair to Kantian philosophy or not, the portrayal goes back to Kant's time with remarks from the poet Heinrich von Kleist. In particular, Kleist's understanding of Kant caused him to '[fall] into early crisis on the suspicion that there is no such relation of congruity, or basic reference, between states of representation of the world by human subjects and objective states of outer reality' (Mehigan 2011: 7).

For Kant, there is a strict division between the phenomenal world and the noumenal world. The former includes our experiences, while the latter is things in themselves (*Ding an sich*). Even synthetic *a priori* knowledge such as mathematical truths, which Kant posits as such a candidate for the synthetic *a priori*, would be unknowable if they were

'... independent objects external to the knower, things-in-themselves that are part of independent, *an sich* reality. It is only if the objects of knowledge and the experience that presents them must somehow conform to the faculties of knowledge, rather than the other way around, that synthetic *a priori* knowledge becomes possible' (BonJour 2010: 23).

Similarly, there is a worry as to whether synthetic *a priori* knowledge has a proper basis in Kant's philosophy. Specifically, if the synthetic *a priori* must conform to our faculties of knowledge, then it places such knowledge on an 'aspect of the psychology of contingent beings' and, so, such knowledge could certainly have been otherwise and would have little claim to necessity (Katz 1997: 9).

My point here is not to give Kant much trouble. Rather, I think Kant's philosophy, even though not traditionally aligned with skepticism, helps show a driving force for skepticism as it exemplifies the division considered here. As Michael Huemer notes, 'the doctrine of a veil of perception is closely related to skepticism; indeed, I believe the two ideas feed off one another and stand or fall together ...' (Huemer 2001: xix).

THE GETTIER PROBLEM

Next, the Gettier problem raises concerns against the allegedly well-entrenched view of knowledge as justified true belief (JTB). Aside from any contentious historical claim of the prominence of the JTB account (Morvan 2023), the Gettier problem is famous for spawning a lot of literature in epistemology. While some philosophers have pointed out that the problem may be traced to Bertrand Russell's 1932 publication of *The Problems of Philosophy* (McGrew, McGrew 2007), Edmund Gettier placed it into prominence with the 1963 publication of 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?' – earning the reputation as 'a single paper potentially of much epistemological consequence' (Hetherington 2016: 1).

The problem has elucidated separate but connected issues within epistemology, such as questions of epistemic luck and virtue epistemology (Pritchard 2003; Broncano-Berrocal 2023), the debate between internalists and externalists on justification (Hetherington 2018), and the prospects of fallibilism, where one can have knowledge without certainty (Anderson 2018). Taking from the above, one of the obvious and notable benefits of this literature is that the varied responses to the Getter problem have helped philosophers refine positions within epistemology. Put generally, Gettier cases have produced both 'orthodox' responses and 'revisionary' responses (Cath 2014: 7) in giving an account of knowledge.

While this creates an interesting challenge for the traditional view of knowledge, the issue here is the link to skepticism. In particular, Mylan Engel notes that Gettier cases may serve to undermine 'second-order internalistic knowledge' in which one may have the claim of 'knowing that one knows' (Engel 2000: 99). Michael Veber agrees, saying that 'if the received view is true, then second-order skepticism (i.e. the view that we never know that we know) is a serious threat' (Veber 2013: 402).

AGRIPPA'S TRILEMMA

In the previous section, knowledge as justified true belief was examined. However, embedded within the JTB account, and without any necessary help of Gettier cases, there is the contested issue of the J – that is, how one should understand justification itself. This issue, maybe unsurprisingly, returns us again to skeptical worries raised by the ancient Greeks, as the Pyrrhonian skeptic in particular relied on the 'Modes of Agrippa – a set of epistemological arguments designed to show that any attempt at justifying judgments must be circular, lead to an infinite regress, or reveal the judgment as an arbitrary and unsupported assertion' (Striker 2004: 13). Here, we will look at how justification has been tackled by three competing views: foundationalism, coherentism and infinitism.

On coherentism, our beliefs are justified through a coherence. One of the most well-known versions comes from Quine's *The Web of Belief* (1978). In such a system, beliefs weave together and interconnect like the threads of a spiderweb. Beyond coherence, too, Quine does not treat all beliefs equally as he gives exceptions for certain beliefs, such as a belief in laws of logic, as 'their revision would greatly "disturb" the overall system' (Carlson 2015: 2).

Yet, even with Quine's nuances added to coherentism, it still faces objections. For one, the system appears to be fallaciously circular, wherein premises that are meant to support a conclusion are, instead, dependent on the conclusion itself. This is, after all, the skeptic's objection above, given that if 'our reasons should move in circles ... [then those] circular reasons are illegitimate in a rational debate' (Olsson 2022: 3).

Another objection is that it may be feasible to have multiple, conflicting webs that all boast equal coherence. In other words, there's a threat of relativism with no way to adjudicate between them (Lycan 2012: 10). The coherentist, then, needs some way in which to adjudicate between equally coherent webs of beliefs, without reference to a bedrock or an infinite chain to help settle the dispute.

As for foundationalism, it has embedded within it the 'presupposition that it is only an *already* justified belief that can give support to other beliefs one has' (Fumerton 2022: 10). Importantly, too, it comments on the structure that knowledge, beliefs, and propositions must have to have justification (Fumerton 2022: 5), with such structure being 'in virtue of its logical and evidential relations to foundational beliefs' (DePaul 2001: viii). This is to say that inferential beliefs must have some epistemic relation to the non-inferential beliefs (i.e. the foundation). This is very reminiscent of Descartes' attempt at first identifying those beliefs which cannot be doubted – as in one's own existence as a thinking thing – to then hopefully build up to justify our less certain beliefs, such as the properties of wax.

One of the perennial objections to foundationalism is that the foundation may be an arbitrary stopping point. Namely, that 'foundationalism is unacceptable because it advocates accepting an arbitrary reason at the base, that is, a reason for which there are no further reasons making it even slightly better to accept than any of its contraries' (Klein 1999: 297). If this is the case, then it cannot hope to justify those beliefs which depend on it for support.

Lastly, there is infinitism. Historically, there are few explicit defenders of this view, but they certainly exist (Klein 1999; Aikin 2014). This is largely because 'it has usually been dismissed as so obviously wrong that arguments against it are not necessary' (Klein 1999: 297). In other words, while the coherentist and foundationalist are given the courtesy of receiving some form of objection before being rejected, merely expressing infinitism is seen as objectionable. In giving a definition of justification, Peter Klein states it, 'is infinite and non-repeating' (Klein 1999: 297).

The problem with infinitism, however, is that it does not appear to be an alternative to skepticism. Rather, it seems to entail skepticism. Tim Oakley, for one, argues for this entailment, stating that 'recognition that one has no evidence as to whether or not there is any evidence for a proposition leaves one in the following position: one is not justified in believing that proposition' (Oakley 2019: 112). Potentially, one may not have epistemic access to the next link in the suggested infinite chain of justification (Klein 1999), and one may be unsure as to whether there is any further link in the chain. Instead, our restricted epistemic access could be our inability to see that there is no further link in the wrongfully supposed infinite chain and, therefore, no justification is to be found. So, as an alternative to skepticism, it may not succeed, as infinitism relapses into skepticism and does not overcome Agrippa's trilemma (Wright 2013: 1114).

BRAIN-IN-A-VAT

Lastly, we turn to the skeptical doubt of one having knowledge of the external world. As Huemer notes, this is a distinct view from idealism as 'The skeptic need not *deny* the existence of an external world, as the idealist does ... the skeptic maintains that we *do not know* there is an external world' (Huemer 2001: 7). That said, this is not entirely fair to the idealist, as the idealist does not deny the existence of the external world, but, rather, they posit a different ontology. More precisely, for Berkeley, our primary idealist, 'only minds and ideas exist; there is no such thing as matter,' but we should keep in mind that trees and the like exist, yet as perceptions as opposed to being matter (Dicker 2011: 3).

The important point here, however, is one that is reminiscent of Kant's epistemology and implications for metaphysics, in which there is a distinction between the world as it is and our experiences. On the connection to Kant, specifically, while there was an attempt to refute idealism in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1999), the separation is not so cleanly distinct from idealist worries. That is, while Berkeley posits God as sustaining the world we do not perceive, Kant has the world in itself to account for 'permanent objects outside us' (Price 1930: 284). Direct knowledge outside our perceptions – whether it be for the skeptical leanings against an external, material world in the fashion of Berkeley or Kant – remains troublesome.

Recent thought experiments have captured this worry as well. Perhaps most famously, there is the 'brain-in-the-vat scenario' which is importantly featured in this debate (Helton 2023: 2). While discussed by Hilary Putnam (1981), the troubles brought about by brain-in-the-vat scenarios have already been articulated given that they 'have a familiar historical precedent ... in Descartes's reflections on the Evil Demon scenario' (Goldberg 2016: 2). The challenge, then, is to overcome the doubt one has in the face of the possibility of a deceptive demon.

While the problem itself is interesting, the answer Descartes provides in overcoming the skeptical challenges of the evil demon is often seen as less appealing. Descartes moves from positing the ability to 'clearly' and 'distinctly' perceive as a form of justification to, after some separate arguments, then positing that an omnibenevolent God exists. Having established the existence of this omnibenevolent God, Descartes rules out the evil demon hypothesis 'from the fact that God is benevolent and hence not a deceiver' and so 'he infers that the truth of what is clearly and distinctly perceived has a divine guarantee' (Frankfurt 2008: 215). Yet, the dissatisfaction with relying on an omnibenevolent God to escape skepticism is twofold.

First, if one is not convinced of Descartes' arguments for theism, then God cannot serve to undermine the evil demon hypothesis. That is, if there is an absence of any successful arguments for God, then Descartes' project cannot get off the ground, as, without God, our ability to clearly and distinctly perceive is without merit. Second, Descartes' attempt seems to become subject to circular reasoning. Again, Frankfurt (2008: 215) notes that '[Descartes'] arguments for God's existence ... proceed from premises that are guaranteed by nothing but the clarity and distinctness with which he perceives them. Thus it seems that he cannot demonstrate that there is a divine guarantee of reason unless he first assumes that the reason can be trusted' (Frankfurt 2008: 215).

Leaving Descartes' attempt for now, we can look at more secular approaches to resolving external world skepticism. For one, we have G. E. Moore's work. Specifically, there is Moore's well-known 'Proof of an External World' (1939). Here, Moore offers, 'an alternative to Kant's "Refutation of Idealism"' (Weatherall 2017: 219). Of course, this proof has been debated at length, with philosophers either dismissing it as being based on ignorance of skepticism (Stroud 1984) or attempting to flesh it out further in its defense (Lycan 2000).

Regardless of whether Moore sufficiently deals with the external world skeptic, criticism of Moore's position has come from Ludwig Wittgenstein. Specifically, there is Moore's 'Certainty' (1939), which Moore had read to Wittgenstein in person (Citron 2015). In this paper, Moore addresses Descartes, with Moore focusing on the Cartesian skeptic's worry of one being in a dream, as opposed to an evil demon's deception and thereby undermining one's knowledge of the external world.

Wittgenstein's main argument against Moore, it seems, rests on Wittgenstein's umbrage at Moore's misuse of the word 'certain' or 'know' if one were to claim, for example, one is certain (or one knows) one is in pain. In other words, 'Wittgenstein's argument runs roughly along the following lines: If the context of utterance is not specific or specifiable, the sense of the utterance is undetermined' (Owesen 2017: 73). As Wittgenstein diagnoses it, Moore is equivocating on the 'ordinary and grammatical' uses of 'certainty' or 'knowing' in such a case (Coliva 2022: x). The equivocation here, too, is touched upon when Moore and Wittgenstein discuss Moore's arguments, as Wittgenstein wishes to draw the distinction between certainty of 'sense-experience-statements' (for example, 'I am certain I am in pain') vs 'material-thing-statements' (for example, I am certain this room has windows) (Citron 2015: 74).

Skepticism of the external world, while a more focused application of skepticism, has spawned a varied and long-lasting debate from modern to contemporary philosophy. Perhaps as varied are the different ways in which the external world skeptic's worries can be expressed in addition to the responses of the non-skeptic.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has examined three ubiquitous topics within (or at least related to) epistemology that fuel the dispute between skeptics and non-skeptics. The first was the treatment of the JTB account of knowledge in the face of the Gettier problem. The issue with the Gettier problem cited here is that it may have potentially devasting consequences for internalism. However, the decisiveness of the objection was not explored, and there still remains a rich debate between internalists and externalists that may sidestep the skeptical implications (if any) of Gettier cases. The second turned toward justification itself. Ancient Greek skeptics have raised Agrippa's trilemma, wherein justification must either be arbitrary, circular, or an infinite regress. Third and lastly, we looked at skepticism aimed at the external world. Here, we saw the difference between idealism and true external world skepticism before turning toward famous skeptical worries, such as the brain-in-the-vat scenario or the evil demon hypothesis. A comparison was also made between attempts at using God to sidestep the external world skeptic as well as attempts which examine the language used in arguments against the external world skeptic.

These issues, along with the preliminary discussion of skepticism, help explain the motivation for skepticism. However, we have also seen how philosophers have attempted to define and defend knowledge (and its parts, such as justification) so as to overcome skepticism. While the challenge of skepticism is perennial, the challenge will also be met with considerable responses from the non-skeptic.

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ANDREW NESSELER

Skeptiškų rūpesčių apžvalga: Gettier problema, Agrippos trilema ir smegenys rezervuare

Santrauka

Apžvelgdamas literatūrą nagrinėju tris svarbius, bet skirtingus būdus, kuriais buvo plėtojamas skepticizmas. Pirmąjį apibūdina Gettier problema ir jos potencialiai skeptiškas poveikis žinioms. Antrasis yra Agrippos trilema, kurioje ne skeptikas neva stengiasi sukurti patenkinamą episteminio pagrindimo aprašymą. Trečias ir paskutinis būdas – smegenų rezervuare scenarijus, kai bandoma įveikti skeptiko iššūkį turėti žinių apie išorinį pasaulį. Darau išvadą, kad pirmiau išvardyti iššūkiai yra svarbūs, tačiau ne skeptiko suformuluoti atsakymai, mano požiūriu, verti apsvarstyti.

Raktažodžiai: skepticizmas, Gettier problema, Agrippos trilema, pateisinimas