

Epistemological Disjunctivism and the Skeptical Problem

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One can build a skeptical argument from a very intuitive epistemic principle, the underdetermination principle (UP): For all S, p, q, if S's epistemic support does not favour p over some hypothesis q which S knows to be incompatible with p, then S is not justified in believing p.

One point which should be made is that S can have epistemic support which favours p over q without having enough epistemic support for believing $\neg q$. In fact S doesn't even need to be justified in believing p in order to have epistemic support which favours p over q, as long as the degree of epistemic support for p is stronger than the epistemic support for q.

Now, let's say that p is an everyday proposition like "I have hands". Imagine a scenario in which everything looks to S as if p were the case, but where S is a brain in a vat suffering from constant hallucinations which make her belief (among other things) that she has hands. Let's call this scenario "BIV". The skeptic can argue that S's epistemic support for p cannot favour p over BIV, given that S's experience if BIV were true would be subjectively indistinguishable from S's experience if p were true.

From the UP principle and BIV (and assuming that S knows about the incompatibility between p and BIV) one can construe a skeptical argument which targets justification.

UP-argument:

- (1) S's epistemic support for believing p does not favour p over BIV (premise, factual epistemic claim).
- (2) If S's epistemic support does not favour p over BIV, then S is not justified in believing p (premise, epistemic principle from UP).
- (3) S is not justified in believing p (MP 1, 2).

I want to signal an interesting point from the discussion between Brueckner (1994) and Cohen (1998) around the structure of the UP-based skeptical paradox. Brueckner brings up that the motivation for the premise (1), that S's epistemic support does not favour p over BIV, is that such epistemic support would be present regardless of whether p or BIV is true. From this, he argues that the motivation for (1) ultimately rests on the claim that the epistemic support S has for p fails to entail p. That is, that the only claim that the skeptic needs to motivate (1) is that the epistemic support for p is not entailing.

Since SK [BIV] is a logically possible proposition, and since the complex evidential proposition E which grounds my belief that P would be true in an SK-world as well as in a P-world, it follows that E does not entail P. In other words, on the current conception of the skeptic's reasoning, the sense in which my evidence [epistemic support] E for P does not favour P over SK is that E fails to entail P. Now premise (1C) says that if my evidence for P does not favour P over SK, then I lack justification for believing that P. So it appears that in the end, the skeptic is arguing that my lack of justification for believing that I am sitting ultimately derives from the fact that my evidence for this belief is non-entailing. (Brueckner, 1994, p. 835)

Cohen (1998, p. 148) understands from this quote that the UP-based argument can be used to support the entailing view for justification, i.e. the thesis that the epistemic support required to justify p must entail p . The combination of UP and the assumption that S 's epistemic support for p doesn't entail p (and consequently doesn't favour p over BIV) leads to the conclusion that S is not justified in believing p . So we could take the UP-argument as a demonstration that if S 's epistemic support doesn't entail p (and therefore doesn't favour p over BIV) then S is not justified in believing p . In other words, if the motivation for the factual epistemic claim in the UP-argument is that the epistemic support for p doesn't entail p , then the UP-argument can be understood as a demonstration that S 's epistemic support for p must entail p if S is justified in believing p .

Faced with this conclusion, one can go two different ways (if one wants to keep the epistemic principle UP). One way is to buy the UP-argument and accept that, since S 's epistemic support for p doesn't entail p , S is not justified in believing p . The other is to stick to the claim that S is justified in believing p , and so reject the factual epistemic claim that S 's epistemic support doesn't favour p over BIV. But this second way involves defending that S 's epistemic support for p entails p . In principle, this sounds implausible, but also sounds implausible that S is not justified in believing p .

Why does it sound implausible that S 's epistemic support for p entails p ? Probably because one also assumes the internalist intuition that S 's epistemic support must be reflectively accessible to S , i.e. that S should be able to know that she has this epistemic support by reflection alone (introspection and/or a priori reasoning). This is the assumption that S has a significant degree of reflective transparency of her own epistemic standing, which helps to explain how S can be justified in holding the beliefs she does. It seems that if we sustain that S 's epistemic support is reflectively accessible to S , we cannot sustain at the same time that S 's epistemic support entails empirical facts about the world such as p . However, this internalist principle has a lot of intuitive appeal, because, if we get rid of it, it becomes difficult to explain how S 's epistemic support can make her justified in believe anything.

The problem is that, if S 's epistemic support is reflectively accessible to S , it is hard to see how this epistemic support is capable of entailing any facts about the world. One can argue that S 's reflectively accessible epistemic support for believing p (understood as the experience as if p were the case) could be replicated in a situation in which S were a BIV and consequently p were not true. If S 's epistemic support can be replicated this way when S is a BIV, then obviously it's not enough for entailing p , for S would have such epistemic support even if p were not true. And it seems that, if S 's epistemic support for p is reflectively accessible, then it can be replicated in a situation in which S is a BIV.

Nevertheless, there is a philosophical position which sustains that, although S 's epistemic support for p is reflectively accessible, it couldn't be replicated in a situation where S is a BIV, precisely because S 's epistemic support entails p (see, for instance, McDowell, 1998 and Pritchard, 2012). This position is called "epistemological disjunctivism". According to epistemological disjunctivism, when an agent is in an optimal case of perception that p (where the perceptual conditions are objectively good and the agent has no defeaters), she has epistemic support for p which is reflectively accessible and factive (it entails p) at the same time. This evidence is her seeing that p is the case, and not merely her seeming as if p were the case. The non-factive epistemic support provided by the seeming as if p could be replicated if S were a BIV, but the factive epistemic support provided by a veridical

perception of seeing that *p* couldn't be replicated if *S* were a BIV. For instance, an agent who is having a normal case of perception, and sees that her dog is on the sofa, has reflective access to factive epistemic support for the belief that her dog is on the sofa. If the very same agent were having a subjectively indistinguishable hallucination induced by a powerful computer she would lack access to this factive support. The epistemic situation of the agent would be different because she would not be seeing that her dog is on the sofa, it merely seems to her like that.

What epistemological disjunctivism tries is to sustain the internalist thesis that *S*'s epistemic support is reflectively accessible (which we are going to call "accessibilism") without sustaining at the same time a thesis which is commonly thought to derive from accessibilism, the new evil demon thesis (NED), which the skeptic assumes when thinking that *S*'s epistemic support for *p* could be replicated if *S* were a brain in a vat.

NED: *S*'s epistemic support for believing that *p* is constituted solely by properties that *S* has in common with her recently envatted physical duplicate.

If NED is accepted, then it follows that the best reflectively accessible epistemic support *S* can have for *p* is compatible with *p* being false, and then that this epistemic support doesn't entail *p*. But if it turns out that accessibilism doesn't entail the new evil demon thesis, then it is at least possible that *S* can have reflectively accessible epistemic support which entails empirical facts about the world. And epistemological disjunctivism is interesting precisely when it comes to block the inference from accessibilism to NED.

This is the argument from accessibilism to the new evil genius thesis:

(1) *S*'s internalist epistemic support for believing that *p* is constituted solely by facts that *S* can know by reflection alone (accessibilism).

(2) The only facts that *S* can know by reflection alone are facts that *S*'s recently envatted physical duplicate can also know by reflection alone (premise).

(3) *S*'s epistemic support for believing that *p* is constituted solely by properties that *S* has in common with her recently envatted physical duplicate (MP, 1, 2).

Epistemological disjunctivism entitles one to reject premise (2), and therefore to avoid the inference of NED in (3) from accessibilism in (1). What is more, epistemological disjunctivism also licenses a rejection of a more general claim which concerns not only *S*'s recently envatted duplicate but any kind of *S*'s physical duplicate in a bad case of perception. This claim is called the highest common factor thesis (HCF).

HCF: The only facts that *S* can know by reflection alone in an optimal case of perception are facts that *S*'s physical duplicate in a corresponding bad case can also know by reflection alone.

Epistemological disjunctivism blocks the argument in favour of HCF which is based on the fact that the experiences in a case of veridical perception and in a BIV scenario are subjectively indistinguishable. McDowell originally makes explicit and rejects this argument (1998, 2009), argument which Pritchard (2012, p. 43) casts as follows:

The highest common factor argument

(HC1) In a bad case, the epistemic support for one's belief is weaker than factive epistemic support (premise).

(HC2) One is unable to introspectively distinguish between the good case and a corresponding bad case (premise).

(HCC1) The rational support that one has in favour of one's belief in the good case can be no better than it is in a corresponding bad case (from HC2).

(HCC2) In the good case, the epistemic support for one's belief is weaker than factive epistemic support (from HC1, HCC1).

From the viewpoint of epistemological disjunctivism, this argument is not valid, because the most that will follow from (HC2) is not (HCC1), but just that the agents in the good and in the bad case are equally epistemically blameless in having the target belief (this would be the only internalist epistemic standing which both agents have in common). But this is not equivalent to the claim that both agents have the same epistemic support reflectively available or that both are equally justified in believing the target proposition. So neither (HCC1) nor (HCC2) follow from the premises of the argument.

If we accept this argumentation, then we can accept that it is at least possible that S has reflective access to factive epistemic support. In other words, that there is no contradiction in sustaining accessibilism while rejecting NED and HCF. At least, this leaves room to explore epistemological disjunctivism as a way to solve the UP-based skeptical problem.

Prima facie, epistemological disjunctivism (ED) can be used to solve the UP-based skeptical argument. And this is so because ED entails the negation of the factual epistemic claim of the UP-argument. This factual claim plays the role of premise 1 in the UP-argument:

1. S's epistemic support for believing p does not favour p over BIV (premise, factual claim).
2. If S's epistemic support does not favour p over BIV, then S is not justified in believing p (premise, epistemic principle).
3. S is not justified in believing p (MP 1, 2).

If the factual claim in 1 is rejected, then UP is not in conflict with S being justified in believing p. We have seen that all the skeptic needs to motivate that S's epistemic support doesn't favour p over BIV is the assumption that it does not entail p. But, according to ED, this assumption is illegitimate, for S's (reflectively accessible) epistemic support for p provided by S's seeing that p entails that p is the case. Therefore, ED allows a rejection of the factual claim of the UP-argument.

There is a final point to be made about the rejection of premise 1. The claim that S's epistemic support favours p over BIV does not entail the claim that S's epistemic support justifies \neg BIV. As we have said at the beginning, S's epistemic support could be enough for favouring p over BIV while not enough for justifying \neg BIV. So the epistemological disjunctivist does not need to claim that S's epistemic support justifies \neg BIV, which may sound to immodest (after all, skeptical scenarios are constructed in a way that one can never be in a position to know their negation). For instance, Pritchard (2015) would say that S's perceptual epistemic support for p, which he understands as factive and reflectively accessible to S, does favour p over BIV but it's not strong enough to justify \neg BIV. The problem is that, if one accepts, like Pritchard does, that S's epistemic support is not enough for justifying \neg BIV, another kind of skeptical argument can be constructed based on the closure principle for justification. This epistemic principle demands that, for S to be justified in believing p, p needs justification for believing \neg BIV. Pritchard proposal would be of no help against a skeptical argument based on the closure principle for justification. Nevertheless, this discussion is beyond the reach of this exposition.

Referencias

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