

OUTLINE

Scepticism

This course will span **four** lectures. In it, we will a small part of the extensive debate on scepticism in epistemology. This will include a discussion of different versions of sceptical argument. After that, we will spend three of the four weeks considering several different families of response to the sceptic.

- 1. Sceptical Arguments**
- 2. Moorean and Dogmatist Responses**
- 3. The Closure Principle**
- 4. Contextualism**

Lecture 1 – Sceptical Arguments

1. Introduction

The notion that our beliefs about the world may not constitute knowledge is an old one. By now you'll be familiar with Descartes dream and evil demon arguments for scepticism. Today, we'll look at sceptical arguments, classic and contemporary. While they differ in their precise execution, their conclusions are the same: despite how things seem to us, *we do not have knowledge of the external world*.

2. Hume's Argument

Hume begins his discussion on this topic by stating that his subject of study is "*the causes that induce us to believe in the existence of body*," where by 'body' he means something like objects as distinct from our ideas of objects. He specifies that he will:

[...] inquire whether the opinion that bodies have a continued existence is produced by the senses, by reason, or by imagination, and shall inquire into the analogous question regarding the opinion that bodies exist distinct from the mind.

The Senses

Considering the **senses** first, he notes that it's impossible for them to give us the idea that objects exist independent of our perception of them. So of the two questions, senses could only possibly give us some reason to think that objects exist independent of our minds. And if the senses are to give us an idea like this latter one, then it would have to be in one of two ways:

- (1) By presenting the impressions we get from our senses as being of objects existing distinct from our minds; OR
- (2) By presenting the impressions we get from our senses as being the objects themselves.

On (1), Hume argues that the senses cannot give us such an impression because, for any given perception of an object, our minds are not part of that perception. But the impression described in (1) requires both objects and minds to be present in order to be an impression of 'objects existing distinct from our minds'. "*When the mind looks further than what immediately appears to it, its conclusions can never be attributed to the senses*"

Thus, by elimination, if the idea of independently existing objects comes from our senses it must be in the manner described in (2).

On (2), Hume begins with a quick argument. He reasons that, if the impressions we get from our senses are presented as being the external objects themselves, then our senses “must be able to relate the objects to ourselves” and so, “we ourselves must appear to our senses”. In other words, for our senses to present something to us as objects that are independent of us, they must ‘know’ what that *us* is. But, he goes on, the question of personal identity is a highly difficult one, and one that escapes answer via the sense alone. If the answer requires theoretical metaphysical considerations, “*it is absurd to suggest that the senses can ever distinguish ourselves from external objects.*”

Here then is Hume argument on the senses in standard form:

- P1.** If the senses give us some reason to think that objects exist independent of our minds, then they do so via (1) or (2).
- P2.** When we perceive objects, our minds do not appear in the content of those perceptions.
- P3.** If our minds do not appear in the content of our perception of objects, then our perceptions of objects cannot *represent* those objects as being independent of our mind.
- C1.** Therefore, the senses cannot give us reason to think that objects exist independent of our minds via (1). (From P1-P3)
- P4.** For us to have a perception which seems to us to be an independent object itself, it must be possible for us to relate objects to ourselves via the senses alone.
- P5.** In order to relate objects to ourselves via the senses alone, we must be able to discern what it is to be us (i.e. a person) via the senses alone.
- P6.** We cannot discern what it is to be a person via the senses alone (because defining what it is to be a person requires metaphysical theorising).
- C2.** Therefore, we cannot relate objects to ourselves via the senses alone. (From P5, P6)
- C3.** Therefore, the senses cannot give us reason to think that objects exist independent of our minds via (2) (From P1, C2)
- C4.** Therefore, the senses cannot give us reason to think that objects exist independent of our minds. (From P1, C3)

Following this argument, Hume makes one last remark on our senses. (This will be familiar to those who have read Locke on secondary qualities.) He argues that, to the senses, our sensations of shape, extension, colour, smell, pain, and pleasure are “the same in their manner of existence”. So, any distinctions we make between these kinds sensations in terms of their independent existence cannot arise from the sensations themselves.

Reason

Hume very briefly addresses the possibility that our idea that objects exist independent of the mind arises from our faculty of reason. First, he argues that we form this idea (about independent objects) without “consulting reason or testing our opinions by any philosophical principles.” So our experience of having this idea suggests reason is not deployed. Second, he argues that we either take objects to be identical to perceptions or we do not. In either case, it would be impossible for us to *infer* that objects exist independent of us and continue to do so independent of our perception of them.

If neither reason nor the senses can provide us with knowledge that objects exist independently, then it can only be the imagination that furnishes us with this belief. But only the senses and reason can give us knowledge. So our belief that objects exist independently to us doesn’t constitute knowledge.

3. Unger’s Argument

Unger argues that “every human being, at best, knows hardly anything to be so.” He begins by addressing some common worries about sceptical arguments in general (worries that he thinks have kept “sophisticated philosophers” from taking scepticism seriously).

First, he considers the position that maintains it is “only reasonable [...] to reject a view which requires that such helpful common terms as ‘knows’ and ‘knowledge’ lead us into error systematically” (200). Unger argues that it needn’t be the case that systematic falsehood leads us into practical trouble. Take some belief you have that you think constitutes knowledge—Unger uses an example involving a region of space, and a belief that that region of space is a vacuum. We’ll use the example of whether there is ice on the ground or not. Suppose your belief that there is no ice on the pavement is false, but that the small amount of ice present doesn’t make a practical difference to you. He notes that

(1) There is no ice on the pavement

entails

(2) For practical purposes there is no important difference between the pavement’s being iceless and its having whatever amount of ice it in fact has.

This is because, if (1) is true then the ‘amount of ice it in fact has’ is none. However, the entailment doesn’t go the other way. It doesn’t follow from (2) that (1) because (2) is consistent with there being a tiny bit of ice on the pavement and (1) is not.

From this, Unger suggests that, in some cases, it may be useful to use to have the false belief like that in (1), as opposed to the true belief like that in (2). And if this is so, then there is no reason to suppose that it is unreasonable to accept a conclusion that entails that we are involved in systematic falsehood (like that entailed by scepticism).

In the remainder of the paper, Unger addresses the worry that scepticism entails that our concept of knowledge doesn't work like any other of our concepts. He argues that our concept of knowledge belongs to a family of concepts which he calls "**absolute terms**". These stand in contrast to "**relative terms**". The former are terms which *do not admit of degree*; the latter, do admit of degree. To use Unger's example, 'flat' is an absolute term, but 'bumpy' is a relative term. A surface can be more or less bumpy, but it can't—he argues—be more or less flat. To be flat is to lack any degree of bumpiness.

Unger acknowledges, that contrary to his claim, we very often speak as though flatness admits of degrees. But he explains this phenomenon by arguing that this is merely a convenient shorthand for saying that something is near or far from flat. So if I said 'this table is very flat', what I'm really saying is "this table is *very nearly* flat". What is more, given that flatness doesn't admit of degrees, if it is true that 'the table is flat', then it follows that 'there is nothing that is flatter (i.e. less bumpy) than the table'.

He then argues that '**certain**' is an absolute term, and terms like '**confident**' and '**doubtful**' are relative terms. By analogy with the term 'flat', Unger infers that if it is true that 'I am certain that *p*', then it must be true that 'there is nothing of which I am more certain (i.e. in which I have less doubt)'. He then maintains that there is hardly anything in which we are, properly speaking, certain. However, this only leads us to scepticism if it is the case that certainty is a **necessary condition** for knowledge.

Unger argues that it *is* a necessary condition; and we are misled by casual ordinary usage into thinking that it is not.