

Third Edition

**THEORY OF
KNOWLEDGE**

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The Skeptic's Challenge

THE TRADITIONAL QUESTIONS

- Basic epistemic questions: Socratic Questions
- Purpose of epistemic appraisal

THE PHILOSOPHICAL SKEPTIC

- The question is not whether we can refute philosophical skeptics.
- information about human fallibility.
- Does this information provides us knowledge?
- awareness about human fallibility is actually in favour of epistemic appraisals
- tautology of skepticism: are we justified in believing the ground of doubts?
- the "perhaps-you-are-wrong" skeptics:
- Descartes' supposition of a malicious demon
- Hilary Putnam's BIV argument.
- skeptics are not saying that we are justified in believing that we are in the vat. They are saying that we are not justified in believing that we are not in the vat.
- The reply: the conclusion does not follow from the premises.
- It takes no great logical acumen to see that no logical contradiction is involved in affirming the premises and at the same time denying the conclusion
- Skeptics third premise: *If those of your experiences which you think are perceptions and memories are such that it is logically possible to have those experiences without perceiving or remembering anything, then you are not justified in believing that you are now perceiving external things or remembering past events.*
- Response to skeptics's third argument: *What justification do you have for thinking that your complex philosophical proposition is more*

reasonable for me than the belief that I am surrounded by familiar physical things?

- skeptics produce a kind of reductio ad absurdum argument

EPISTEMOLOGISTS' FAITH IN THEMSELVES

- the traditional questions: (A) *What am I justified in believing?*
- second question forces itself upon us: (B) *What am I justified in presupposing when I try to find out what I am justified in believing?*
- If I'm not justified in **making** any **presuppositions** when I try to answer the first question, then I will have no reasonable way of evaluating any of the answers that may come to mind.
- Certain things are presupposed by the fact that one is able to ask the questions.
- The ability to ask, "What can I know?" and "What am I justified in believing?" presupposes that one has the concepts of knowledge and of epistemic justification.
- "It would be absurd to look for something if one had no idea at all of what one is looking for.

- ***(P 1) I have an idea of what it is for a belief to be justified and I have an idea of what it is for a belief not to be justified; I have an idea of what it is to know something; and I have an idea of what it is for one thing to be more justified for me than another.***

- I consider my various beliefs and try to order or rank them with respect to their justification. This presupposes that I can know something about my beliefs and present state of mind.

- ***(P2) I am justified in believing that I can improve and correct my system of beliefs. I can eliminate the ones that are unjustified and add others that are justified, and I can replace less justified beliefs about those topics by beliefs about them that are more justified.***

- there are some properties such that, if I have them, then I can be said to know directly that I have them.
- Internalism: One presupposes that there are certain things one can know about oneself without the need of any outside assistance.
- Human's epistemic capacity, rationality.
- Epistemologists presuppose, then, that they can succeed. This means, therefore, that they have a kind of faith in themselves.

ON THE JUSTIFICATION OF THIS FAITH

Am I justified in making such presuppositions?

- three possible belief-attitudes
 - (1) I may deny the proposition; or
 - (2) I may affirm the proposition; or
 - (3) I may withhold the proposition.
- If I deny that the faith is justified, then it would hardly be reasonable for me to pursue the task of traditional epistemology. And if I affirm that the faith is justified, then I will be faced with questions about justification once again - this time questions about my justification for believing that the traditional presuppositions are justified. The wise epistemologist, therefore, would provisionally withhold belief in the proposition that his faith is justified.
- One may object, "But it is unreasonable to proceed if you do not think you are justified in proceeding!" The answer is, of course, that that is not unreasonable. What is unreasonable is to proceed when you think you are not justified in proceeding. And from the fact that you do not think you are justified, it does not follow that you do think you are not justified.

THE PROBLEM OF THE CRITERION

- "What do we know?" "What is the **extent of our knowledge**?" and
- "How are we to decide, in any particular case, whether we know?" "What are the **criteria of knowing**?"
- If we know the answer to either one of these questions, then, perhaps, we may devise a procedure that will enable us to answer the other.
- Is there a way out?
- **two possibilities**: (1) Particularists' approach: We may try to find out what we know or what we are justified in believing **without making use of any criterion** of knowledge or of justified belief.
- Or (2) Generalists' or Methodists' approach: we may try to **formulate a criterion** of knowledge without appeal to any instances of knowledge or of justified belief.
- I have assumed that we can know something about our beliefs. we begin as "particularists": we identify instances of knowing without applying any criteria of knowing or of justification.
- epistemic justification is objective, internal, and immediate.
- epistemic justification is objective in that it can itself constitute an object of justification and knowledge. It is possible to know that we know and it is possible to be justified in believing.

EPISTEMIC JUSTIFICATION

epistemic concepts presuppose a single **relational concept** "So-and-so is at least as justified for S as is such-and- such.", "so-and-so" "believings" and "withholdings."

"More justified," & "at least as justified."

D 1 p is counterbalanced for S = Df S is at least as justified in believing p as in believing the negation of p; and S is at least as justified in believing the negation of $\neg p$ as in believing p .

The Greek skeptic, **Pyrrho of Elis** (c. 365-275 B.C.) - all propositions are counterbalanced.

Pyrrhonism - trying to avoid having unjustified belief is more reasonable than trying to have justified belief., as we will see, is not presupposed by the present book.

D2 p is probable for S = Df believing the negation of p, S is more justified in believing p.

Epistemic probability vs statistical probability:

We must take care to distinguish this fundamental epistemic sense of "probable" from the sense that that expression has in statistics and in inductive logic.

D3 p is beyond reasonable doubt for S = Df S is more justified in believing p than in withholding p

D4 p is evident for S = Df For every proposition q, believing p is at least as justified for S as is withholding q

D5 p is certain for S = Df For every q, believing p is more justified for S than withholding q, and believing p is at least as justified for S as is believing q

This concept is illustrated by those propositions about mental life that are sometimes called "self-presenting." It is also illustrated by certain logical and metaphysical axioms that form the basis of what we know a priori.

FORMAL EPISTEMIC PRINCIPLES

We have taken "at least as justified as" as an **undefined locution**. Obviously, we have to take some locution as undefined. But the fact that we have not defined it does not mean that we cannot say anything about what is intended by it. If we set forth certain **axioms for the locution**, we can illuminate just what it is that we are tend to express by it.

(A1) If A is more justified than B for S, then B is not more justified than A for S

(A2) If A is more justified than B for S, and if B is more justified than C for S, then A is more justified than C for S

(A3) If the conjunction p&q is beyond reasonable doubt for S, then

believing p&q is more justified for S than believing p while withholding q

If "John is a musician" is beyond reasonable doubt and if "John's brother is a musician" is also beyond reasonable doubt, then accepting the conjunction, "John is a musician and John's brother is a musician," is more justified than accepting just one of the two conjuncts.

(A4) If anything is probable for S, then something is certain for S

This type of principle is one feature of what is called "founadationalism" in the theory of knowledge

THE OBJECTIVITY PRINCIPLE

(A5) If S knows that p, then, if S believes that he knows that p, then S knows that he knows that p

What could we say to one who does not believe that this principle is true? We could cite the following **preanalytic data**:

- (i) people often know that they know (I know that I know that I'm in Rhode Island); and
- (ii) people know such things without having any specialized information about epistemology or the theory of epistemic justification. Hence
- (iii) when we know that p, it may be the case, not only that there is an experience that makes it known to us that p, but also that there is an experience that can make it known to us that we know that p. But what would the second experience be? Our objectivity principle tells us, in effect, that the second experience is the same as the first.

THE 13 STEPS

We note, finally, that our undefined epistemic concept and the axioms that may be provided for it enable us to set forth a **hierarchy of epistemic concepts**. This hierarchy involves 13 epistemic categories—

Justified, not evident - The proposition that you will walk tomorrow may be **beyond reasonable doubt** for you. But nothing that you can find out today can make it evident for you today that you will walk tomorrow.

The difference between what is evident and what is beyond reasonable doubt but not evident, is not a mere quantitative difference. It is a **qualitative difference**, like that between being in motion and being at rest. It is also comparable to the distinction between the situations wherein one is conscious and has auditory sensations and that wherein one is conscious and has no auditory sensations. And it is comparable to the distinction between the situation wherein one is alive and conscious and that wherein one is alive but not conscious.

A proposition is said to be “**epistemically in the clear**” for a subject S provided only that **S is not more justified in withholding that proposition than in believing it**.

A proposition p is said to be “**obvious**” for a subject S provided only that, **for every proposition q, S is more justified in believing p than in withholding q**.

epistemic hierarchy

- + 6. Certain
- + 5. Obvious
- + 4. Evident
- + 3. Beyond Reasonable Doubt
- + 2. Epistemically in the Clear
- + 1. Probable
- 0. Counterbalanced
- 1. Probably False
- 2. In the Clear to Disbelieve
- 3. Reasonable to Disbelieve
- 4. Evidently False
- 5. Obviously False
- 6. Certainly False

A further principle that is needed to complete our hierarchy of 13 steps may be summarized this way: If a proposition p epistemically in the clear for S, then p is probable for S. Instances of it are: "If agnosticism is not more justified for S than theism, then theism is more justified for S than atheism"; and "If agnosticism is not more justified for S than atheism, then atheism is more justified for S than theism." The point of including this principle here is to insure that **whatever is epistemically in the clear is also probable**.

Certainty and the Self-Presenting

SELF-PRESENTATION

sensations present us with things *other* than themselves and that, in so doing, they also present *themselves*.

Awareness of the visual sensations (but it would be a mistake to say that you *see* them).

whether sensations and certain other properties (namely dreaming, imagining, hoping, wondering, fearing, liking, and disliking) may be said to present us with *themselves*.

If you have it, it follows logically that you are *thinking*.

Of course, it is physically or causally necessary that, in order to think, you must have a brain and therefore many physiological properties. But it is not *logically* necessary that if you think then you have such properties.

Our definition is this:

Every property that P entails includes the property of thinking

One property may be said to *include* another if the first is necessarily such that anything that has it also has the second.

the property of being F may be said to *entail* the property of being G provided that believing something to be F includes believing something to be G.

self-presenting properties are a source of certainty.

If you think about riding a bicycle, then you have all the justification you need for *believing* that you are thinking about riding a bicycle.

MI *If the property of being F is self-presenting, if S is F,*

and if S believes himself to be F, then it is certain for S that he is F

intentional properties: Some self-presenting properties pertain to our *thoughts-thinking*, judging, hoping, fearing, wishing, wondering, desiring, loving, hating, and intending.

sensible properties And some of them have to do with the ways in which we *sense*, or are *appeared to*.

although these properties may mislead us about *other* things, they are not a source of error about *themselves*.

objection: "But contemporary science has established that we have no knowledge at all of our thoughts and indeed that we cannot even know *whether* we are thinking."

If science *had* established these things, then of course, what we have been saying would be wrong. Upon investigation, however, it turns out that these are *not* things that "science has established." They are things that would be true if science were to tell us what certain philosophers of science think it ought to tell us.

SENSIBLE PROPERTIES

We now turn to those self-presenting properties that pertain to *sensing*, or *being appeared to* ...

In the second of his *Meditations*, Descartes offers what he takes to be good reasons for doubting whether, on any occasion, he sees light, hears noise, or feels heat.

Then he observes, "Let it be so, still it is at least quite *certain that it seems to me that* I see light, that I hear noise and that I feel heat."

This observation about **seeming** should be contrasted with what St. Augustine says, in his *Contra Academicos*, about **appearing**.

Let us contrast Descartes' statement, "It seems to me that I see light," with St. Augustine's "I know that this appears white to

me."

For we have here two quite different uses of "appear" words.

"It seems to me that I see light," when uttered on any ordinary occasion, might be taken to be performing one or the other of two quite different functions:

(1) The expression might be used simply to report one's belief; in such a case, "It seems to me that I see light" could be replaced by, "I believe that I see light." Taken in this way, the "seems" statement expresses what is self-presenting, but since it is equivalent to a belief-statement it does not add anything to the cases we have already considered.

(2) "It seems to me"- or better, "It seems to *me*"— *may* be used not only to report a belief, but also to provide the speaker with a way out, a kind of hedge, in case the statement prefixed by, "It seems to me," should turn out to be false.

This function of, "It seems," is thus the contrary of the performative use of, "I know," to which J. L. Austin had called attention. In saying, "I know," I give my hearers a kind of guarantee and, as Austin said, stake my reputation, but in saying "It seems to me," I play it safe, indicating that what I say carries no guarantee at all, and that anyone choosing to believe what I say does so at his or her own risk.

But the word "appear" as it is used in St. Augustine's statement ("This appears white to me") performs a very different function:

it describes a certain state of affairs that is not itself a belief. When **"appear" is used in this descriptive, "phenomenological" way**, then one may say consistently and without any incongruity, "That thing appears white to me in this light, but I know that it is really grey."

One may also say, again, consistently and without any incongruity, "It appears white to me in this light and I know that, as a matter of fact, it *is* white."

The latter statement illustrates two points overlooked by many contemporary philosophers, the first being that in such a statement, "appear" cannot have the hedging use just referred to, for if it did, the statement would be incongruous (which it is not).

The second part ("I know that it is white") would provide a guarantee which the first part ("This appears white") withholds.

The second point is that the descriptive, phenomenological use of "appears" is not restricted to the description of *illusory experiences*.

Merely by varying the state of the perceiving subject or the state of the intervening medium, or by varying other conditions of observation, we may also vary the ways in which the things that are perceived will appear to us. And "appear"-words *may* be used to describe such ways of appearing.

If, for any such characteristic F, I can justify a claim to knowledge by referring to something that is *appearing* F (by saying of the wine that it now *looks* red or *tastes* sour to me), where the verb and adverb are intended in the descriptive, phenomenological sense just indicated, then the *appearing* in question is self-presenting. The claim that I thus justify, by saying of something that it appears F, may be the claim that the thing *is* F, but, as we have seen, it may also be some other claim.

To the question "What justification do I have for thinking that something now *looks* red to me or *tastes* sour?" I could reply only by reiterating that something does now look red or taste sour.

Strictly speaking, "The *wine* tastes sour to me," and "*something* looks red to me," do not express what is self-presenting in our sense of this term.

For the first statement implies that there *is* a certain thing—namely, the wine — that I am tasting, and the second statement implies that there *is* a certain external thing that is appearing red to me. But, "I am tasting wine," and, "There is a certain external thing that is appearing red to me," do not express what is self-

presenting.

What justifies me in thinking that I am tasting wine is *not* simply the fact that I am tasting wine, and what justifies me in thinking that a certain thing is appearing red to me (and that I am not, say, merely suffering from a hallucination) is not simply the fact that a certain thing *is* appearing red to me. To arrive at what is self-presenting in these cases, we must remove the reference to the external thing - to the wine in, "The wine tastes sour to me," and to the appearing thing in, "That thing appears red to me." This, however, is very difficult to do, since our language was not developed for any such philosophical purpose.

Do we have ground for **doubting the evident character of what is expressed by statements about appearing?** Doubts have been raised in recent years and we should consider these briefly.

SOME MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT APPEARING

There are *some* **descriptive appear-statements** that do not express what is self-presenting – for example, "She looks just the way her aunt did 15 years ago."

If we describe a way of appearing by *comparing* it with the way in which some physical thing happens to have appeared in the past or with the way in which some physical thing is thought normally to appear, then the justification for what we say about the way of appearing will depend in part upon the justification for what we say about the physical thing; and what we say about the physical thing will not now be self-presenting.

It has been argued, however, that the types of appear-statements we have just been considering *also* involve some comparison with previously experienced objects, and, hence, that what they express can never be said to be self-presenting.

It has been suggested, for example, that if I say, "This appears white," then I am making a "comparison between a present object and a formerly seen object." What justification is there for saying

this?

It is true that the expression, "appears white," may be used to abbreviate, "appears the way in which white things normally appear."

"white thing" may be used to abbreviate, "thing having the color of things that normally appear white."

the point of "appear white" is not to *compare* a way of appearing with anything. Using, "appears white," in this way, we may say, significantly and without redundancy, "**Things that *are* white normally *appear* white.**"

More generally, it is in terms of this descriptive, non-comparative use of our other "appear" and "seem" words (including "looks," "tastes," "sounds," and the like) that we are to interpret those appear-statements that are said to be self-presenting.

arguments to show that appear-words cannot be used in this non-comparative way.

Each of the following three arguments, I believe, is quite obviously invalid.

(I) The first argument may be summarized in this way.

"(a) Sentences such as, 'This appears white,' are 'parasitical upon' sentences such as, 'This *is* white'; that is to say, in order to understand, 'This appears white,' one must *first* be able to understand, 'This is white.'

Therefore (b) 'This appears white' ordinarily means the same as, 'This appears in the way in which white things ordinarily appear,'

Hence (c) 'This is white' *cannot* be used to mean the same as, 'This is the sort of thing that ordinarily appears white,' where 'appears white' is used in the way you have just described.

so (d) there is no clear sense in which what is expressed by, 'This appears white,' can be said to be self-presenting."

There is an advantage in thus making the argument explicit. For to see that the conclusion (d) does not follow from the premise (a), we have only to note that (c) does not follow from (d).

From the fact that a linguistic expression is ordinarily used in one way, it does not follow that that expression may not also sometimes be used in another way. And so even if the linguistic hypothesis upon which the argument is based were true, the conclusion does not follow from the premise.

(2) The following is a more serious argument:

"(a) If the sentence, 'I am appeared white to' does not express a comparison between a present way of appearing and anything else, then the sentence is completely empty and says nothing at all about a present way of appearing.

But (b) if, 'I am appeared white to,' expresses what is certain, then it cannot assert a comparison between a present way of appearing and anything else.

Therefore, (c) either 'I am appeared white to' is empty or it does, not express what is certain."

Here the **difficulty lies in the first premise.**

It may well be true that, if an appear-sentence is to communicate anything to another person, then it must assert some comparison of things.

Thus if I wish *you* to know the way in which I am appeared to now, I must relate this way of being appeared to with something that is familiar to you.

Two different questions have been confused here.

One is this: (A) "If you are to understand me when I say something about the way in which I am appeared to, must I be comparing that

way of appearing with the way in which some object, familiar to you, happens to appear?"

And the second question is, more simply: (B) "Can I apprehend the way in which I am now appeared to without thereby supposing, with respect to some object, that the way I am being appeared to is the way in which that object sometimes appears or has appeared?"

The question that we have been concerned with is (B), not (A).

From the fact that question (A) must be answered negatively, it does not follow that question (B) must also be answered negatively.

The argument presupposes an absurd thesis about the nature of thought or predication. This thesis might be expressed by saying that "all judgments are comparative."

It tells us that in order to believe, with respect to any particular thing *x*, that *x* has a certain property *F*, one must *compare* *x* with some other thing *y* and thus assert or believe of *x* that it has something in common with the other thing *y*. But clearly, we cannot derive "*x* is *F*" from "*x* resembles *y*" unless, among other things, we can believe *noncomparatively* that *y* is *F*.

(3) Still another argument designed to show that appear-statements cannot express what is certain, may be put as follows:

"(a) In saying, 'Something appears white,' you are making certain assumptions about language; you are assuming, for example, that the word, 'white,' or the phrase, 'appears white,' is being used in the way in which you have used it on other occasions, or in the way in which other people have used it.

Therefore (b), when, you say, 'This appears white,' you are saying something, not only about your present experience, but also about all of these other occasions.

But (c), what you are saying about these other occasions is not certain.

therefore (d), 'This is white' does not express what is certain."

The false step in this argument is the inference from (a) to (b).

We must distinguish the belief that a speaker has about the words he is using from the belief that he is using those words to express.

What holds true for the former need not hold true for the latter.

A Frenchman, believing that "potatoes" is English for apples, may use, "There are potatoes in the basket," to express the belief that there are apples in the basket; from the fact that he has a mistaken belief about "potatoes" and "apples," it does not follow that he has a mistaken belief about potatoes and apples.

Similarly, it may be that what a man believes about his own use of the expression, "appears white," is something that is not certain for him - indeed what he believes about his own language may even be false and unreasonable; but from these facts it does not follow that what he intends to assert when he utters, "This appears white to me," is something that cannot be certain.

THE PROBLEM OF THE SPECKLED HEN

We consider finally what is sometimes called "the problem of the speckled hen."

Consider the visual sensation that is yielded by a single glance at a speckled hen. The sensation may be said to contain many speckles. One may ask therefore, "*How many* speckles are there?" If we judge, say, that the sensation contains 48 speckles, we may very well be mistaken: perhaps there are a few more speckles or a few less. Yet our judgment is a judgment about the **nature of the sense-datum** – or about the **nature of the way we sense**.

The fact that such a judgment may be mistaken would seem to be in conflict with our view according to which the nature of what we sense is self-presenting and therefore a source of

certainty.

Let us recall what we said about the nature of self-presentation: if a property is self-presenting, then every property that it entails includes the property of thinking.

This means that **a self-presenting property is a property that is relatively simple and easy to grasp.**

Now the property of containing 48 speckles *entails* the property of being a speckle (for whoever believes something to have the property of containing 48 speckles also believes something to have the property of being a speckle).

But the property of having 48 speckles does not *include* the property of being a speckle (one can *have* 48 speckles without thereby *being* a speckle). Hence the property of having 48 speckles is not a self-presenting property.

And therefore the experience involved in looking at a speckled hen is not inconsistent with what we have said about self-presenting properties and certainty.