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A New Peircean Response to Radical Skepticism

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Abstract: The radical skeptic argues that I have no knowledge of things I ordinarily claim to know because I have no evidence for or against the possibility of being systematically fed illusions. Recent years have seen a surge of interest in pragmatic responses to skepticism inspired by C. S. Peirce. This essay challenges one such influential response and presents a better Peircean way to refute the skeptic. The account I develop holds that although I do not know whether the skeptical hypothesis is true, I still know things I ordinarily claim to know. Although it will emerge that this reply appears similar to a classic contextualist response to radical skepticism, it avoids two central problems facing that response.

Keywords: Peirce, pragmatism, skepticism, knowledge, truth, justification

1. Introduction

The radical skeptic argues that I have no knowledge of things I ordinarily claim to know because my lived experiences are indistinguishable from the hypothetical scenario that I am merely being fed the impression of having those experiences. On this hypothesis, I have no evidence for or against the possibility of being fed the illusion that, for instance, I have two hands. Hence, I do not know that I have two hands—or even fingers, toes, and so forth.

Recent years have seen a surge of interest in pragmatic responses to skepticism inspired by C. S. Peirce.¹ Peirce's pragmatic theory of inquiry and his trenchant criticism of Cartesian doubt are familiar even to those who are faintly acquainted with American pragmatism. This essay first explores Erick Olsson's influential Peircean response to the radical skeptic. Olsson argues that we can use Peirce's philosophical framework to deny the skeptic's premises that we do not know that we are not systematically deceived. I argue that Olsson's Peircean response to the radical skeptic fails, and that a better Peircean response turns on the falsification of a different premise the skeptic embraces. The Peircean account I develop holds that, although I do not know whether the skeptical hypothesis is true, I still know what I ordinarily claim to know.

¹ See Friedman (1999); Olsson (2005a), (2005b); Hookway (2008).

The implication is that I can retain knowledge of commonsense propositions despite the possibility of deception.

2. The Radical Skeptical Argument

The problem of radical skepticism can be posed as follows. Let S be any skeptical hypothesis similar to the systematic illusion scenario. Let O be some proposition I claim to know which is incompatible with S. O could be the proposition that I have two hands. O propositions are those nearly everyone believes which are often taken for granted. The radical skeptical argument is as follows:

- S1. I do not know not-S.
- S2. If I do not know not-S, then I do not know O.
- S3. So, I do not know O.

The argument is valid and S1 and S2 seem true. S1 appears true because I have no evidence for or against the possibility that all my experiences are artificially generated. S2 appears true because if I know that I have two hands, for example, I know that I am not being deceived about whether I have two hands. If I do not know whether I am being deceived, however, I do not know I have two hands. S3 follows: I do not know I have two hands.

3. Olsson's First Peircean Response

Olsson treats Peirce's response to skepticism in two places and construes the skeptical argument differently in each. In *Against Coherence* (2005b), he adds the following premise to the argument:

- S4. If I do not know O, then I should stop believing O.

From S3 and S4 he derives:

S5. I should stop believing O.

From S1, S2, and S4, Olsson concludes that I should stop believing I have two hands. This reasoning applies to any of my ordinary beliefs. Hence,

UC. I should give up all my present beliefs.

UC is the “uncertainty consequence” of the skeptical argument. According to Olsson, Peirce shows that when an inquirer is confronted with the skeptical argument, she has no reason to doubt that she is not deceived, and can therefore remain committed to her commonsense beliefs. The falsity of S1 then follows by S4. S4 entails that if I need not stop believing that I am not deceived, I know that I am not deceived.

Rather than considering whether Peirce’s view shows what Olsson takes it to show, consider the plausibility of S4. The adequacy of Olsson’s response turns on attributing S4 to the skeptic. Olsson maintains that the skeptic is committed to S4 for the following reasons. First, it is commonsensical. It would be strange to agree that you do not know where you parked your car, for instance, while holding onto your belief that you parked it behind the market. Second, the importance of the skeptical argument is not merely to suggest that we do not know many of the things we think we know, but to have us give up beliefs we do not know. Thus, the importance of the argument lies in UC, which is not forthcoming unless S4 is added to the skeptic’s premises. Without S4, radical skepticism becomes “an empty exercise without any clear bearing on human inquiry” (Olsson 2005b, 177).

The skeptic would likely reject S4. First, it is not always the case that one should relinquish believing what one does not know. We often have very good reason to believe something despite not knowing it. For example, astronomers currently do not, in fact, know whether dark matter exists. But this does not mean the scientific community should simply

abandon that belief. Otherwise anomalous gravitational effects have lead astronomers to posit dark matter with confidence, regardless of its never having been directly detected. Other examples are easy to find. Olsson claims the skeptical argument is “empty,” by which he seems to mean *purposeless*, if it has no practical consequences. Yet, the surprising conclusion that I do not know I have two hands is not purposeless. Its purpose is epistemic, not practical. The conclusion that we do not know many things we normally claim to know has purchase in challenging the justification of our beliefs, whether we make the further decision that those beliefs are no longer suitable for guiding our actions. The importance of the skeptical argument is not found in necessitating that we discard beliefs we do not know, but in undermining our reasons for holding ordinary beliefs. These considerations suggest that the skeptic would deny S4. The radical skeptical argument, then, remains standing.

4. Olsson’s Second Peircean Response

In “Not Giving the Skeptic a Hearing: ‘Pragmatism and Radical Doubt’” (2005a), Olsson uses Peircean insights to challenge the original skeptical argument. Peirce suggests that we know we are not systematically deceived. That is, S1 is false. Olsson reconstructs the argument as follows.

First, Peirce identifies knowledge with true belief.² Although this may seem controversial, the view finds support in contemporary epistemology.³ On Peirce’s account, when one settles on a certain belief there is often no difference between belief and true belief. Inquirers cannot both believe O and doubt O is true. Moreover, belief that O may be legitimate even if the

² See Peirce (1905a, 170, 10), (1877, 11).

³ See Sartwell (1991), (1992); Goldman (1999); Hetherington (2001).

believer does not possess immediate justification for O. For example, there may simply be no good reason available for doubting the belief.

Next, Peirce observes that we begin philosophical inquiry with beliefs we already hold: “[T]here is but one state of mind from which you can ‘set out’, namely, the very state of mind in which you actually find yourself at the time you do ‘set out’—a state of mind in which you are laden with an immense mass of cognition already formed” (1905a, 167). One belief I hold when I begin inquiry is that I am not systematically deceived about having two hands. Peirce suggests that confronting the radical skeptical argument does not motivate me to doubt beliefs I hold when I begin inquiry. The argument seems to be this. If I come to doubt O, it is because I have discovered something surprising about O.⁴ To discover something surprising about O is to have an experience that suggests not-O.⁵ If I come to doubt I have two hands, I must have had the surprising experience of not having two hands. Peirce suggests that we are not surprised by the radical skeptical hypothesis. After all, on that scenario our lived experiences are indistinguishable from the experiences we would have if we were systematically deceived. Consequentially, the skeptical argument does not get me to doubt beliefs I hold when I begin inquiry. This means I know that I have two hands, and therefore I know that I am not systematically deceived. Hence, S1 is false.

There is reason to doubt this Peircean response, however. Olsson targets S1, which holds that I do not know I am not systematically deceived. The skeptic justifies this premise by claiming that I have no evidence for or against the possibility of being deceived. My lived experiences are perfectly consistent with the hypothetical scenario that those experiences are illusions. Importantly, then, the justification of S1 does not rest on the hypothetical scenario

⁴ Peirce (1905b, 484).

⁵ Peirce (1905c, 299).

being true. If it did, we could falsify S1 by showing that our ordinary beliefs are true. That is Olsson's Peircean reply. He relies on an understanding of knowledge that renders the justification of ordinary beliefs inessential for knowledge. However, the skeptic warrants S1 by purporting to undermine our *reasons* for holding our ordinary beliefs. Since Olsson's Peircean account takes knowledge to be mere true belief, Olsson fails to find an adequate response to the skeptic.

5. A New Peircean Response

A better Peircean response could be to deny S2, the claim that if I do not know that I am not systematically deceived, then I do not know what I ordinarily claim to know.⁶ Contemporary debate about S2 focuses on exploring the epistemic closure principle. Alternatively, I suggest that we can use Peirce's insights to challenge the truth of the conditional. The Peircean can say it is true that I do not know that I am not systematically deceived, but this does not undermine my knowledge of propositions I ordinarily claim to know.

Take first the truth of the antecedent. When the skeptic reports that I do not know that I am not being deceived, it is because I have no justification for claiming that I am not deceived. The epistemic context of the skeptical scenario requires reasons for belief. In this context, the possibility of error undermines the warrant of our ordinary beliefs. Insofar as the skeptic claims that knowledge is true justified belief, then, the Peircean should accept that the skeptical context truly undermines knowledge of ordinary beliefs.

Now turn to the falsity of the consequent. Despite not knowing that I am being deceived, the Peircean claims, I still know that I have two hands. There is a contextual difference between the skeptical error-possibility and ordinary error-possibilities. I know that I have two hands

⁶ According to Olsson, Peirce leaves the skeptic's premise S2 "untouched" (2005b, 200).

because the everyday epistemic context—the context in which I act on a daily basis—does not require me to justify my beliefs against the possibility of wholesale deception. For Peirce beliefs establish rules of action that guide behavior. For example, if I believe there is a table in front of me, I may sit on it; and if I do not have such a belief, I would not attempt to sit. Beliefs can be called into question by doubt. Doubt is not mere disbelief, according to Peirce, but a state that suspends one's ability to act on the belief in question. Doubt arises when we discover information contrary to what we currently believe. For Peirce the aim of inquiry is to seek out new information that will settle conflicts of belief. We must find reason to reject, modify, or bolster beliefs called into doubt.

If Peirce's view of inquiry is plausible, there is reason to think that we need not justify our beliefs in the face of the skeptical challenge. The skeptical scenario does not induce a state where we suspend acting on our ordinary beliefs such that we are required to reject, alter, or further support those beliefs. To induce such a state of doubt, the skeptic would have to present information that could serve as evidence for the skeptical proposal. But the skeptical hypothesis is justified because there appears to be no such evidence. By hypothesis, lived experiences are symmetrical with artificial ones. One might think that encountering the skeptical hypothesis itself will motivate doubt. But this cannot be right. The skeptical hypothesis is a mere logical possibility, and logical possibility alone does not appear to be a sufficient reason to suspend action. For Peirce, then, the context in which we act out our lives does not require us to warrant beliefs against the skeptic. In the practical context, I know I have two hands. Thus, S2 is false.

6. Avoiding Problems with Contextualism

My Peircean response to radical skepticism appears to be a traditional contextualist one. The traditional contextualist holds that we have knowledge of commonsense propositions in everyday contexts, but not in contexts in which radical skeptical worries about error have been raised. The contextualist claims that skepticism is compelling under the conditions of philosophical reflection, but not in everyday life. The Peircean response I advance, however, avoids two major difficulties with the traditional contextualist response.

The first difficulty that confronts traditional contextualism is that it must provide an account of what constitutes a change in epistemic contexts. My account sweeps away the problem. The Peircean is not required to give an explanation of a shift in epistemic contexts. In all contexts, the Peircean will accept that we cannot justify that we are not systematically deceived, but add that such justification does threaten our knowledge of ordinary propositions. The worry about context change only holds for accounts that attempt to falsify S1. The contextualist claims that S1 tacitly assumes two contexts of knowledge, one high and one low, determine whether one is being deceived. We have knowledge of propositions in low standards contexts, like the corner store, but not in more demanding contexts, like the philosophy classroom. The problem for the contextualist is that the skeptic holds that even in low standards contexts ordinary knowledge claims are false—that we have no knowledge *tout court*. Targeting S2 sidesteps this difficulty. For Peirce we act out our lives in both low and high standards contexts. Thus, neither context turns over to the skeptic.

The second problem with traditional contextualism is that it arguably legitimizes the concern that the skeptic's standards are the best ones, and so we lack knowledge after all. The philosophical context appears to be the more demanding and rigorous one, not the everyday one.

The skeptic seems to be using a more precise and correct standard for assessing knowledge claims. The Peircean response to this worry is that the division between the context that knowledge requires justification and the context that knowledge requires mere true belief does not legitimize the skeptical context as the correct one. The fact that the skeptical hypothesis undermines the justification of our beliefs is itself no reason to give that context the upper hand. The Peircean would argue that, if anything, the fact that the hypothetical skeptical scenario provides no reason for altering our behavior undercuts its legitimacy as the preferred epistemic context. Assuming that our beliefs function to guide inquiry, the skeptical error-possibility has no affect on our beliefs.

7. Conclusion

Let me take stock and conclude. I first challenged Olsson's responses to the radical skeptic. In one case, he claims the skeptic should hold a premise that, on my view, the skeptic should deny. In another case, he fails to see that Peirce's view that knowledge is mere true belief will not faze the skeptic who holds that the hypothetical scenario undermines reasons for belief. Olsson's mistake is to use Peirce's work to falsify S1. However, the Peircean should falsify S2. There is indeed no justifying our beliefs against the possibility of deception. But knowledge in the context in which we act does not require such justification: reasons are crucial only when presented evidence that counters our beliefs, and the skeptical argument does not provide such evidence. This response has advantages over two common problems with the traditional contextualist response. First, it eschews having to explain what constitutes a change from everyday to skeptical epistemic contexts. Second, it does not suggest that the skeptical context is

the correct one. For these reasons, the Peircean account developed here provides a strong response to the radical skeptic.

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