

PHL340 Handout 7: Dogmatism

§1 Epistemology Background

Today we're going to look at an influential paper by Jim Pryor on how perceptual experience provides justification for our beliefs about the external world. But in order to understand Pryor's paper, we need some background from 20th Century epistemology.

§1.1 Knowledge and Justification

Beliefs can be false, but knowledge must be true: knowledge is *factive*. But what is the difference between knowledge and mere true belief? The question goes back to Plato:

For true opinion, as long as they remain, are a fine thing and all they do is good, but they are not willing to remain long, and they escape from a man's mind, so they are not worth much until one ties them down by (giving) an account of the reason why. (*Meno* 98a)

Then suppose a jury has been justly persuaded of some matter which only an eye-witness could know, and which cannot otherwise be known; suppose they come to their decision upon hearsay, forming a true judgment: then they have decided the case without knowledge (*Theaetetus* 210b-c)

Plato's answer – that knowledge is true belief with an account (*logos*) – is a precursor to the JTB analysis of knowledge: S knows that p if and only if (1) S believes that p, (2) p is true, and (3) S's belief that p is justified. Thus justification, in the JTB-tradition, is what distinguishes knowledge from mere true belief.

§1.2 Scepticism

Sceptics deny our claims to know. Sceptics about morality deny that we know moral truths; sceptics about mathematics deny that we know mathematical truths; and sceptics about the external world deny that we know truths about the world.

More generally, *scepticism* about a given class of propositions is the view that, for any proposition p in the class, and any thinking subject S, 'S knows that p' is always false.

Descartes provided a model for external-world scepticism to follow. Given any ordinary claim about the world – that I have hands, or that there are sixty students in this class – he observed that there is a way the world could be such that everything would look the same to us but the claim would be false.

Sceptical Scenarios: While happily snug in bed I could undergo a dream in which I teach a class of a twenty students. Or (what would be way worse) I could be a disembodied brain floating in a vat of fluid whose experiences are the products of subtle manipulation by vindictive scientists.

A sceptical hypothesis is any claim to the effect that one of these sceptical scenarios obtains. If I know that I have hands, however, I should also be in a position to know that I'm not a brain in vat, since knowledge is *factive* and brains in vats don't have hands. Yet sceptical hypotheses are designed so as to be compatible with all of my actual (or potential) evidence: no matter how much evidence I gather, I'll never be in a position to know that I'm not in a sceptical scenario. So all my ordinary claims to knowledge are false.

Let q be the denial of a sceptical hypothesis (e.g. the hypothesis that we are brains in vats), and let p be some ordinary proposition about the world (e.g. that I have hands).

1. I know that if p then q (e.g. if I have hands, I am not a brains in a vat)
2. I do not know that q [*Sceptical Premis*s]
3. If I know that if p then q , then if I know that p then I know that q [*Closure Principle*]
4. So if I knows that p then I know that q [from 1 and 3]
5. Therefore, I do not know that p [from 2 and 4]

Given that we can substitute just about any proposition about the world for p , this argument seems to undermine my claim to know any truths about the external world.

G. E. Moore offered a response to the sceptic that was an early instance of what Pryor later calls the *modest anti-sceptical project*.

Moore's argument takes as a premiss the denial of 5. He says that 'I have a hand' is true, and that it is known to be true (albeit without proof). Given the denial of 5, Moore can reject 2 (compare: 'I have conclusive evidence that I am awake'). This move – from the denial of 5 to the denial of 2 – has come to be known as the *Moorean Shift*.

Neo-Mooreans like Pryor face the following problem: they must explain what it is about perceptual justification that entitles us to deny 5 (as Moore does).

§1.3 Structure of Justification

Pryor resurrects a kind of *foundationalism* about justification. Foundationalists accept versions of the following two claims:

1. Some beliefs – the 'basic' beliefs – are such that their justification does not depend upon whether any other belief is justified
2. A belief is justified iff it is either a basic belief or suitably related to basic beliefs (e.g. a belief is derived from some basic beliefs through a chain of valid logical inferences).

Obvious Questions: What could it be for a basic belief to be justified? Which of our beliefs might plausibly serve as basic beliefs? Can the class of basic beliefs identified by the foundationalist justify a sufficient number of our non-basic beliefs? The last question stymied Descartes. We'll see Pryor's answers to the first two questions.

§1.4 Nature of Justification

What does it take for a belief to be justified? A popular answer is reliabilism:

Reliabilism about Justification: a subject's belief that p is justified iff it is caused by a reliable method (i.e. a method that reliably generates true beliefs).

Reliabilism entails externalism about justification:

Externalism about Justification (One Version): S's belief that p can be justified even if she is not in a position to determine whether the conditions for justification are met.

Pryor wants an account of how perceptual experience justifies beliefs, but wishes to avoid commitment to either reliabilism about justification or externalism about justification.

§2 Pryor's Project

Pryor's exclusive concern is *perceptual justification* – justification inherited from perceptual experience. His focus on experience sets him apart from reliabilists who are more concerned with the *mechanisms* responsible for perceptual experience (e.g. whether or not they are *reliable*) than the character of the experience itself.

One bit of apparatus concerns an important distinction between two very different notions of justification. Suppose that to be justified in your belief that p is just to possess a good reason to believe p. We might read this 'reasons' talk in two ways:

- *Propositional Justification*: S possesses propositional justification for the belief that p iff she has good reason to believe that p
- *Doxastic Justification*: S possesses doxastic justification for the belief that p iff S's belief that p was formed on the basis of good reasons [or, more generally, when the belief is formed in the right way].

Propositional justification concerns the reasons we in fact possess, while doxastic justification concerns the reasons on the basis of which our beliefs are formed.

Dogmatism (Pryor's view) is a thesis about propositional justification, not doxastic justification (compare 'justification' vs. 'ill-foundedness' on p. 521).

Pryor distinguishes two sorts of anti-sceptical project:

1. Ambitious: refute the skeptic on his own terms. So establish that we can justifiably believe and know things on the basis of perception, and to do so using only premisses that the skeptic allows us to use.
 - a. *Note*: Pryor judges this project to be more or less doomed. Who engages in this project? Descartes, and some reliabilists.
2. Modest: to establish to *our* satisfaction that we can justifiably believe and know things (without contradicting 'obvious' facts about perception). The task is to salvage as many of our pre-theoretical beliefs as possible, yet at the same time diffuse the sceptical arguments that begin from premisses we accept. [*Question*: is Pryor's distinction coherent? Why?]

Pryor's paper has two goals: (1) to provide a statement of the best possible sceptical argument against perceptual justification; (2) to sketch a theory of perceptual justification – dogmatism – that is both independently plausible and capable of accomplishing the modest anti-sceptical project.

§3 Scepticism about Justification

Pryor's Aim: to find a formulation of the sceptical challenge that brings out the common core between the sceptical challenges to knowledge and to justified belief (pp. 522-523)

Pryor grants that if we know a sceptical scenario doesn't obtain, we know such in part because of things we know about perception. He calls this **(5)**, and so rejects broadly *a priori* responses to scepticism (such as Putnam's). [*Question*: why accept (5)?]

A sceptical argument built on the basis of (5) must show that there is a requirement for

us to know that we are not being deceived, and this requirement must be satisfied *prior* to knowing anything on the basis of perception. (p. 524)

This sense of ‘priority’ is epistemic: justification for p is **prior** to justification for q just in case our reasons for believing p do not presuppose or rest upon our reasons for believing q.

Pryor proposes a new sceptical premiss for the case of justification, one that when combined with (5) generates a sceptical argument against perceptual justification.

SPJ: ‘If you’re to have justification for believing a proposition p on the basis of certain experiences or grounds E, then for every q which is ‘bad’ relative to E and p [for Pryor’s notion of a ‘bad’ case, see p. 527], you have to have antecedent justification for believing q to be false – justification which doesn’t rest on or presuppose any E-based justification you may have for believing p.’ (p. 531)

Example: you undergo an experience as of a red apple. In response, you come to believe that something is red. SPJ says that your belief is justified on the basis of the experience only if you have reason to rule out sceptical scenarios incompatible with the truth of your belief – reasons *not derived* from your experience as of a red apple. For instance, you must have some reason to believe that you aren’t being deceived by an evil demon, or to believe that your eyes aren’t malfunctioning.

The Dogmatist (i.e. Pryor) denies SPJ on the grounds that we do not need *antecedent* reason to believe that you’re not in a sceptical scenario in order to have a justified belief that p (See p 532).

§4 Dogmatism

To answer the sceptic, Pryor’s dogmatism cannot explain perceptual justification in terms of propositions for which we have prior justification. Another way to put the point: dogmatism must provide a theory of immediate justification, where S is *immediately justified* in believing p iff S is justified in believing p, and this justification does not rest on the justification/evidence S possesses for other propositions.

Dogmatism about Perceptual Justification (DPJ) [Approximate Version]: when it *perceptually seems* to you as if p is the case (i.e. you undergo an experience that represents p as being the case), you have immediate justification for believing p.

DPJ does not require that the subject be *aware* of his/her experiences. A subject has justification simply in virtue of *having* an experience as of p. As a result, experiences do not provide evidence for a subject’s beliefs: their contents do not constitute premisses that could serve in an argument for a proposition we believe.

Notice that Pryor’s discussion of perceptual experience presupposes a kind of

loose representationalism. *A good question*: could one plausibly maintain both dogmatism and direct realism?

One might well wonder whether DPJ isn't simply insane. Our senses deceive us all the time, so it seems irrational to take them at face value in the way that DPJ appears to recommend.

In response to this kind of worry, Pryor emphasizes his commitment to *fallibilism*: justification for a belief that p is compatible with the falsity of p.

Question: ought we accept fallibilism? Does it follow from the unreliability of our senses?

Dogmatism therefore does not offer justification that is perfectly sensitive to the truth. Dogmatist justification is also *defeasible*: all other things being equal, we should believe what we have dogmatist reasons to believe, but these reasons might be trumped or defeated by other evidence (see 'prima facie justification' on p. 534). For example, if you had reason to suspect that a sceptical scenario were actually the case, this reason would defeat any defeasible (i.e. *prima facie*) perceptual justification.

Dogmatism about Perceptual Justification (DPJ) [Precise Version]: when it *perceptually seems* to a subject as if p is the case (i.e. she undergo an experience that represents p as being the case), a subject acquires (a) immediate (b) fallible (c) defeasible (d) propositional justification for believing p.

DPJ provides an answer to the first central foundationalist question (i.e. what is it for basic beliefs to be justified?). It also provides a partial answer to the second (i.e. which beliefs could serve as basic beliefs?): basic beliefs are those that could be justified by perceptual in accordance with DPJ. Which beliefs satisfy this condition?

Pryor says that the reach of perceptual content will determine which beliefs could be justified in accordance with DPJ. As a result, the range of potential basic beliefs will increase if we agree with Siegel that visual experience represents high-level properties. See pp. 538-539 of Pryor's paper for discussion.

A question we'll touch on when we discuss Siegel's response to Pryor: does the mechanism by which visual experience comes to represent high-level properties (e.g. that property of being a pine tree) undermine dogmatism?

Master Argument for Dogmatism (starting 536):

1. Dogmatism about perceptual justification is the 'natural view'
2. We ought to hold on to a natural view until we are forced to abandon it [*General Methodological Claim*]
3. None of the standard reasons offered in support of rejecting dogmatism about perceptual justification should force us to abandon the view.
4. So: we ought to accept dogmatism about perceptual justification [from 1-3]

ARGUMENT FOR 1:

- i. For a large class of propositions (e.g. that there are hands), having an experience with one of these propositions as its representational content justifies a subject in believing that the proposition is true.
- ii. In these cases, our justification does not depend upon any justifying argument
- iii. Natural explanation of ii: the *mere fact* that one has a visual experience with a particular phenomenal character is sufficient to make it reasonable for one to believe the relevant proposition.
- iv. So: some perceptual beliefs have a kind of (dogmatist) defeasible but immediate justification. [From i-iii]

Notice: on p. 536 Pryor explicitly denies that the *reliability* of our perception plays a role in securing this basic justification. For a related worry, see his first gloss on ‘theory laden’ on p. 540. As we’ll see, Susanna Siegel in her paper on cognitive penetrability pushes this sort of objection.

WHY ACCEPT 3?

Philosophers deny the ‘natural view’ on the grounds that it runs into insuperable difficulties.

But, Pryor insists, most of these difficulties evaporate once we get straight on what counts as immediate justification (cf. p. 537). In particular, he claims his dogmatist account makes clear the compatibility of immediate justification and fallibilism.

Another reason to resist the difficulties that burden the natural view: if we accept dogmatist-style immediate justification, we have grounds to deny the sceptic’s premiss SPJ, and so accomplish the ‘modest’ anti-sceptical project.

OBVIOUS OBJECTIONS

DENY 1: because (a) perceptual experience lacks the requisite sort of representational content (i.e. reject i); or because (b) Moore was wrong, justification is inferential, and an experience provides (via its content) a premiss for an argument whose conclusion is the content of a perceptual belief (i.e. reject ii); or because (c) the mere fact that one has an experience of a certain kind is not the right sort of thing to play an essential role in an account of perceptual justification (i.e. reject iii).

DENY 3: insist that the traditional difficulties persist for dogmatism.

DENY 2: argue that preference for a certain ‘natural view’ counts as no more than folk prejudice, and so it should not be given weight in our philosophical theorising.