

PHL340 Handout 8: Evaluating Dogmatism

§1 Dogmatism

Last class we looked at Jim Pryor's paper on dogmatism about perceptual justification (for background on the notion of justification, see the handout from last class):

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

Recall that *S* possesses *propositional justification* for the belief that *p* iff she has good reason to believe that *p* (so *S* can possess propositional justification for a belief even if she never forms the belief, or forms the belief for some other reason). She is *immediately justified* in believing *p* iff she is justified in believing *p*, and this justification does not rest on the justification *S* possesses for other propositions. Her justification is *defeasible* iff all other things being equal, she ought to believe what her justification provides us reason to believe, but these reasons might be trumped or defeated by other reasons (these other reasons would be 'defeaters'). And her justification for her belief is *fallible* iff it is possible for the belief to be both justified and false.

We get a slightly less jargon-y statement of dogmatism in Roger White's paper:

'Dogmatism: For certain contents *P*, if it appears to *S* that *P*, and *S* has no reason to suspect that any skeptical alternative to *P* is true, then *S* is justified in believing *P*, regardless of whether she is independently justified in denying any skeptical alternative.' (p. 527)

A skeptical alternative, in this context, is a scenario in which it appears to *S* that *p*, but *p* is false (e.g. a scenario in which it appears to *S* that there is a red mug on her nightstand, but in reality there is nothing on her nightstand, and it only seems to her otherwise because she unknowingly swallowed a hallucinogenic drug).

The primary novelty of dogmatism comes from two features of the view: (a) the mere fact that a subject undergoes a perceptual experience with a particular content suffices to provide propositional justification; (b) perceptual experience can provide a subject with propositional justification even when she has no independent reason to believe that skeptical scenarios do not obtain.

Part of Pryor's motivation for dogmatism comes from his desire to block a skeptical argument whose target is the claim that perceptual experience can provide propositional justification for our beliefs about the external world (see pp. 527-528 of White's paper for an nice statement of this motivation). The skeptical argument turns on two claims: roughly, (1) perceptual justification requires independent reason to rule out skeptical scenarios, and (2) a subject can rule out skeptical scenarios only on the basis of perceptual experience.

Pryor accepts (2), and introduces dogmatism in order to avoid (1). White, at the end of his critical paper, suggests that we go the other way and accept (1) while rejecting (2). While Pryor scoffs at the suggestion that one could have a non-perceptual basis for ruling out sceptical scenarios, White thinks it plausible that we have default *a priori* justification for ruling out these scenarios. See pp. 552-553 in White, and p. 524 in Pryor.

We also looked at Pryor's central argument for dogmatism:

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]

Here is what Pryor says in defence of 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]

Today we'll look at several famous responses to dogmatism. The first objection comes from Susanna Siegel, while the others come from Roger White.

§2 Initial Objections

Before we discuss what Siegel and White have to say in response to dogmatism, let's briefly remind ourselves of some of the 'obvious' responses to Pryor's argument:

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 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.

Notice: If Pryor means to track Strawson's notion of a 'pre-theoretical scheme', then he can resist the objection to 2. But the claim that dogmatism

forms part of our pre-theoretical scheme is much stronger, and thus much harder to defend, than the relatively weak claim that dogmatism is the view that our pre-reflective selves are inclined to adopt.

Siegel and White take aim at 3: each raises a direct objection (or, in White's case, several direct objections) to dogmatism. If successful, the objections promise to overcome any status that dogmatism might have as the 'natural' view of perceptual justification.

§3 Siegel's Cognitive Penetration Objection

Siegel's objection takes aim at the dogmatist claim that having an experience with a certain representational content is sufficient (absent defeaters) to provide propositional justification (cf. p. 208). The objection has the following general structure (cf. p. 202):

1. It is possible for subjects to undergo visual experiences that are cognitively penetrated (roughly: whose representational contents depend upon a subject's earlier cognitive states).
2. Among these possible cases of cognitive penetration are cases in which cognitive penetration causes a visual experience that cannot justify beliefs formed in response to the experience.
3. Dogmatism predicts that in these cases visual experience justifies beliefs formed in response to the experience.
4. So dogmatism makes a wrong prediction about perceptual justification [from 1-3].

And with 4 we seem to have grounds to reject dogmatism.

When trying to unpack Siegel's argument, the first task is to acquire a workable definition of *cognitive penetration*. Siegel provides an extended discussion of how we ought to define the cognitive penetration of visual experience (see §1 of her paper). She also considers strategies for re-describing putative cases of cognitive penetration. The definition of cognitive penetration she ends up with goes roughly as follows:

'If visual experience is cognitively penetrable, then it is... possible for two subjects... to have visual experiences with different contents while seeing and attending to the same distal stimuli under the same external conditions, as a result of differences in other cognitive (including affective) states.' (pp. 205-6, emphasis mine)

Armed with this definition of cognitive penetration, Siegel provides two examples to support 2. We're going to look at the first one:

'Angry-looking Jack. Jill believes, without justification, that Jack is angry at her. The epistemically appropriate attitude for Jill to take toward the proposition that Jack is angry at her is suspension of belief. But her attitude is epistemically inappropriate. When she sees Jack, her belief makes him look angry to her. If she didn't believe this, her experience wouldn't represent him as angry.' (p. 209)

Dogmatism seems committed to saying that Jill's visual experience of Jack provides propositional justification for the belief that he is angry. After all:

- Jill has no independent reason to believe that a sceptical scenario obtains
- She is unaware of the causal influence of her earlier epistemically inappropriate attitude. So even if knowledge of that influence would defeat whatever justification

her later experience otherwise provides, her belief is nevertheless justified (or so says the dogmatist) because she possesses no such defeater.

- Jill has no positive reason to think that her visual experiences are systematically cognitively penetrated in a way that would defeat the justification these experiences would otherwise provide.

Siegel argues that the dogmatist's prediction about Jill's case—namely that her visual experience provides immediate propositional justification for the belief that Jack is angry—fails to jibe with our intuitive verdict about the case. If she's right, then Jill's case supports 2 and 3 from the larger argument.

Potential Replies to Siegel's Argument

There are three ways to reply to Siegel's argument against dogmatism:

1. *Deny 1*: Deny that the problematic kind of cognitive penetration is even possible
 - a. *Siegel's reply* (p. 207): dogmatism is a theory of perceptual justification, and such theories must cover hypothetical as well as actual cases. So it is enough that the cases of cognitive penetration she considers are possible in the strong sense that they are not inconsistent with the laws of nature.
 - b. *A potential dogmatist response*: hypothetical scenarios in which the relevant cognitive penetration occurs may be different enough that the victims of cognitive penetration do not undergo what we should recognize as a visual experience. In general, we aren't clear on the limits of visual experience, so we cannot assume that these limits extend to cognitive penetration cases.
 - i. *Question*: what do you think of this response to Siegel? Can you think of something better?
2. *Deny 2*: Accept that the cognitive penetration cases are possible, but deny that these are cases in which visual experience fails to provide propositional justification.
 - a. *Siegel's Reply* (§4.1): she contrasts the Jill case with one in which a similar effect on visual experience occurs because of an alien jolt to the brain—a mere accident or psychological mishap. Even a reliabilist would say that a 'jolt' case does not force us to classify the resulting experience as incapable of justifying belief. A belief could be justified despite being false, as long as its falsity derives from the kind of bad luck introduced in the jolt case. By contrast, Siegel thinks that problematic cognitive penetration could result from rational control (cf. p. 213). The products of rational control, unlike the product of the random zap, are not usually classifiable as merely lucky (or unlucky). [Note: Siegel also considers several other attempts to deny 2]
 - b. *A potential dogmatist response*: Siegel needs us to accept that causal or 'etiological' factors, even when unknown, may nevertheless affect the justificatory status of a subject's visual experiences. But this concern for etiology may already presuppose a kind of reliabilism, for perhaps only someone with reliabilist sympathies would claim that etiology intimately affects perceptual justification. And dogmatists already reject reliabilism (as well as almost any other kind of externalism about justification). See pp. 540

of Pryor's paper for his version of this kind of reply (Siegel discusses this reply of Pryor's at pp. 211-212.

- i. *Question*: Siegel is sceptical that a sufficiently strict internalism about perceptual justification could be used as part of a reply against her cognitive penetration cases. But might she not be wrong, and so guilty of unfairly stacking the deck against internalists dogmatists?
3. *Deny 3*: Accept that the cognitive penetration cases are possible, and accept that these are cases in which visual experience fails to provide propositional justification, but deny that dogmatism must predict that these experiences provide such justification.
 - a. *Siegel's Reply* (§4.2): for a dogmatist to deny that a given visual experience, in a particular set of circumstances, suffices to provide immediate justification, she must show that a subject who undergoes the experience already possesses some kind of defeater (e.g. inside knowledge about the defectiveness of her vision). She runs through a number of potential defeaters in §4.2, but argues that none provide a general recipe for denying 3.

§3 White's Bootstrapping Objection

Roger White provides a number of sophisticated arguments against dogmatism. We're going to briefly look at the last of them (which is really a more general argument developed by epistemologists in the 1990s and 2000s). This is the objection from bootstrapping.

The objection has the following general form:

1. It is a constraint on a right account of perceptual justification that it avoid endorsing the 'bootstrapping procedure'
2. Dogmatism must endorse the bootstrapping procedure
3. So dogmatism fails as an account of perceptual justification.

What is the bootstrapping procedure? Here is White:

'A series of colored cards are presented to me. Viewing each card, I judge what color it is by its appearance, and then note by introspection that it appears to be that very color: "That one is red, and it appears red, that one is blue and it appears blue. . ." I thereby take myself to have amassed a large body of inductive evidence that things tend to appear to me as they are in color, that is, that my color-vision is reliable. Call this kind of procedure "bootstrapping." It is obviously silly. A test of this sort provides no evidence at all for the reliability of my color-vision.' (p. 543)

Dogmatism appears committed to endorsing this procedure because the mere appearance of a coloured card, in the absence of defeaters, suffices to provide justification for believing that the card possesses the colour it appears to have. But if perceptual experience provides justification for believing a bunch of propositions of the form *that card has colour C*, surely I'm thereby justified (now by induction) in believing that my colour perception is reliable.

What can a dogmatist say in reply to the bootstrapping objection? One option, pursued by Weisberg (2011), would be to insist that bootstrapping is a general problem that isn't special to dogmatism, and on that basis argue that it is not a

constraint on a right account of perceptual justification that it block the bootstrapping procedure.

Note: If you're interested, do read White's paper and take a look at what he says in detail about both the bootstrapping objection and two other objections to dogmatism. The first objection, in particular, appears somewhat complicated because of its reliance upon probability, but it isn't actually necessary to know probability theory to understand what White is doing.