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Just Say Know

Contrary to popular opinion, the skeptic is neither ignorant, atheist, nor Sophist. Rather, the skeptic's aim is one and the same as that of any other philosopher: truth, wisdom, and knowledge. Oddly enough though, the skeptical argument is, in fact, not an argument at all. Instead, the skeptical stance is one that merely challenges the soundness of any theory presented before it. These skeptical challenges recognize the fallibility of human knowledge, and because of this recognition, demands that both the claims, and the explanations of it, meet the challenge if they are to be acceptable as facts. The most integral aspect of the skeptic's challenge though, is the manner in which it is made. The method of the skeptic's challenge is, in essence, the same as those made by the character of Socrates in various Socratic dialogues. That is to say that the challenger (the skeptic or Socrates respectively) makes no claims of his own whatsoever. Instead, any challenge to a theory or claim is derived from, and exists within, the parameters of the claimant or theorist's own claims or theory only. The goal then is not to challenge one theory with another, but simply to raise doubts that, if unanswered, serve to invalidate the certainty and soundness of a theory or claim.

The first and primary skeptical challenge however, precedes even the conception of a theory. This is the problem of the criterion. The problem is presented as such: any theory must be conceived by identifying first either an example, or a criterion, but an example cannot be identified without establishing criterion for identification, and criterion cannot be conceived of without an example to look to. Therefore, it cannot be said that any theory as such is founded on any *certain* grounds. A theory of knowledge in particular then, is fallible at best, in that its foundations are not absolutely certain. For the purpose of this essay, however, we will ignore the

problem of the criterion and focus on other skeptical challenges as they apply to theories of knowledge. Although there are many epistemological theories, the primary focus of this essay will be placed on both Foundationalism and Coherentism, as they are representative, in general, of the two main branches of knowledge theories. Further, as the vast majority of epistemic theories share a common definition of knowledge as true, justified belief, this definition is then susceptible to the skeptical challenge as well.

The Foundationalist theory, as the name alludes to, relies on particular fundamental claims as foundation for the remainder of the theories claims. These claims are subject to the stringent requirement of truth, and truth, for the Foundationalist, is defined in terms of certainty. That is to say that for a belief to be deemed true, there must not exist even the most miniscule of possibilities that it could be false. Truth being established under this standard, the Foundationalist then turns his attention to the aspect of justification. A belief then, is said to be justified only if it is deductively entailed from one or a number of these foundational truths. Inductive reasoning, therefore, is invalid as a means of justification in Foundationalist theory.

An example of this process is found in Descartes' *Meditations*, in which Descartes basically disregards any and all of his beliefs in an effort to find at least one that meets the criterion of certainty. These disregarded belief were of two types, those that relied on empirical evidence and those that were of an abstract nature, relying only on logic and rationality. Empirical beliefs were dismissed on the grounds that the sensory perceptions that justify them are fallible, therefore not certain (i.e. sometimes our eyes, ears, hands, etc. mislead us). Truth then, can only be realized by means other than empirically verifiable evidence, namely strict rationality. The conclusion of this rational contemplation produced that one famous truth for which Descartes is repeatedly quoted, "I think, therefore I am." From this, Descartes deduced

that since he was, there must be something that created him, and further, this thing that created him must be God, etc., etc. The Achilles' heel of this and any Foundationalist claims then, is that if the initial truth or foundation from which further claims are deduced turn out, or are shown to be false (uncertain), then the entirety of beliefs that are drawn from it are invalid as well.

Coherentism, on the other hand, concedes the fallibility of human knowledge, and shifts the principal focus of its theory from truth to justification. In Coherentist theory then, a belief or claim is said to be justified if it coheres to a larger set of accepted beliefs. In addition, unlike Foundationalism, this justification by means of coherence can be established through either deductive or inductive entailment. Also, empirical evidence is an acceptable means of establishing justification as well. If this justification through coherence exists, then the belief or claim is deemed true as well. In their concession of the fallible nature of human knowledge though, the Coherentists maintain an escape clause of sorts. That is to say that, if a claim, belief, or set of beliefs or claims are accepted as knowledge and later found to be false (by whatever means), it would be said that those beliefs or claims never were knowledge in the first place. The strangeness of this last statement aside, what this basically implies is that although we may possess knowledge, we are never certain as to whether it is knowledge. Without this constraint of certainty then, a claim to knowledge can be either true or false as long as it is justified, and we are not aware of its falsity.

Coherentism faces another problem, however, that is exemplified in the Gettier examples. These are not problems of certainty or truth, but of justification. Basically, Gettier constructs situations in which one may believe something that is in fact true, but the justification for this belief is invalid, or misplaced. For example, a man sees a silhouette in the distance that he believes to be another man. He seems to be justified in his belief in that, empirically, the shape

and size of the silhouette is that of a man, and let's say it's moving in a human manner even. Also, let's say that the silhouette is actually a new type of scarecrow that moves when the wind blows. Further, about a hundred feet behind the scarecrow, unbeknownst to the observer, there is actually a living man. So, the observer's belief is true, but it is not justified, or justified correctly anyway. Now, since the observer is unaware of his ill-founded justification, he believes that he *knows* that there is a man standing in the distance.

If the Coherentist agrees that this claim is knowledge, then it eliminates justification as a criterion for knowledge. If the Coherentist decides that the claim is not knowledge, the implication is that justification must be indefeasible or certain. The only means of achieving indefeasibility in this or similar situations though, would be to view the situation from a God's eye view. Since we, as humans and not gods, are incapable of this observation from a God's eye view, are we not also incapable of providing this indefeasible justification as well?

These problems of certainty and/or justification are precisely the problems that the skeptical challenge aims to address. As the method by which the skeptic proceeds was mentioned earlier, we can now examine the mechanism that he utilizes for the purpose of his challenge. This mechanism is referred to as Agrippa's trilemma, has been around for thousands of years, and is presumably named after a skeptic named Agrippa that lived in ancient Greece. Despite its name, Agrippa's trilemma, is actually comprised of five modes or "argumentative strategies for inducing universal suspension of judgment... The Five Modes are Discrepancy, Relativity, Infinity, Assumption, and Circularity... The Mode of Discrepancy makes the point that people can disagree about virtually anything, [and] that of Relativity suggests that any claim can, [and] perhaps should, be qualified with a rider 'according to you'."¹ Neither one of these

¹ Williams, Michael. "Agrippa's Trilemma," *Problems of Knowledge: a Critical Introduction to Epistemology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. P.61

first two modes, however, imply anything skeptical as yet. Rather, “the point of the first two modes is to get us to acknowledge that, if anyone puts forward a claim as more than a personal opinion or a report of how things seem to him [(Mode of Relativity)], he can reasonably be asked to explain why [because others may disagree with his claim (Mode of Discrepancy)].”² It is once such a claim is made though, that the skeptical aspects of Agrippa’s trilemma come into play.

Imagine then that there are three parties, a Foundationalist, a Coherentist, and a skeptic. Both the Foundationalist and the Coherentist make their claims, as described earlier, and the argument begins. First, as both theories rely on certainty, in one form or another, the skeptic would reply to each claim by simply saying, “and how do you know that?”, to which each would respond with another claim, and the skeptic would again ask, “and how do you know that?” This process could continue indefinitely, or until either claimant responded with some claim that could be objectively proven true.

Even the Foundationalists’ claim that, “I think, therefore I am,” is susceptible to further questioning in that it cannot be proven. The skeptic could argue that the Foundationalist was simply a brain in a vat, being artificially stimulated to believe he was thinking. The temptation at this point, is to question the skeptic’s “brain in a vat claim”; but (a) the skeptic is not making a claim that the Foundationalist is a brain in a vat, only that it is a possibility, a minute one perhaps, but a possibility nonetheless; and (b) it is not the skeptic that is making any claim to knowledge, he is only questioning those that are. Similarly, the Coherentist could be engaged ad infinitum with providing justification for one claim, and justification for that justification, etc. In any case, it is evident that both of these Q & A sessions could go on indefinitely, and as such, it would be referred to as an infinite regress. This infinite regress is essentially encompassed within the third mode of Agrippa’s trilemma, Infinity. What this implies then, is that, for both

² Id at, p. 62

the Foundationalist and the Coherentist, there is no initial *certain* claim that can serve as either *foundation* for the deduction of any further claims, or justification for an initial belief, or set of beliefs, through which other belief are justified by means of *coherence*, respectively.

Essentially, since they are incapable of identifying a point at which to begin, how is it possible to move forward (or in any direction for that matter)? It isn't.

For the sake of argument (or just to watch them squirm) the skeptic may choose to ignore the Mode of Infinity, as he did earlier with the problem of the criterion. Now having disregarded both the problem of the criterion, and the Mode of Infinity, the Foundationalist and/or the Coherentist have only the task of surviving the modes of Assumption and Circularity to meet the skeptic's challenge. This is a task easier said than done however.

The Foundationalist argument, as stated in the previous paragraphs, is susceptible to the problem of infinite regress, and tries to solve this problem by using a claim like Descartes' "I think, therefore I am" as foundation for its theory. Also, as stated above, such a statement doesn't meet the requirements for certainty that are explicitly necessary by the Foundationalist's own theory (brain in a vat possibility). This is essentially resolved by assuming such claims to be self-evident, and thereby justified as foundational claims. When assumption, not proof or certainty, is permissible with regards to these claims, how then can it be prohibited when it is applied to any other beliefs? Moreover, if these assumptions are to serve as foundation for other beliefs, how can those beliefs deduced from assumptions possibly meet the requirement of certainty that is mandatory within the parameters of the Foundationalist theory? This is essentially the point of the Mode of Assumption.

Coherentist theory falls victim to this same inconsistency. As Foundationalists solve the infinite regress problem by assuming a self-evident claim as *certain* without requiring proof,

Coherentists assume there to be some beliefs that are self-evident in that they do not require justification. Similarly, it is these unjustified, self-evident beliefs that justify other beliefs that are either deduced or induced from them. These beliefs are formed into sets of beliefs, and still other beliefs, in turn, are justified by their coherence to the set. As the Foundationalist and Coherentist theories share a common solution to the infinite regress problem, they share a common inconsistency within their solution: the uncertainty of either the self-evident Foundationalist claim, or the self-evident justification of the initial Coherentist claim: the Mode of Assumption.

The Coherentist's problems do not end there though. The contention that a belief is justified through its membership in an accepted set of beliefs is problematic as well. First of all, there is the possibility that a true, justified, belief may be dismissed because it is in opposition to an already accepted set of belief. For example, if you told someone in the 10th century A.D. that the world was round, they would either think you were crazy or a moron because everybody *knows* that the world is flat. Oddly enough then, to the Coherentist in that time, your claim that the world was round would not be knowledge, and everybody else's claim that the world is flat would be. Secondly, Coherentism is susceptible to the Mode of Circularity. That is to say that justifying one belief by its coherence to a second, then justifying the second by its coherence to the first is faulty reasoning at best.

For example, the Coherentist could claim that the moon orbits the earth. The skeptic would naturally ask, "How do you know?" The Coherentist could then respond by saying the theory of gravity (with regards to planetary motion) says that a smaller body will orbit a larger body. The moon is smaller than the earth, so my claim is coherent to the theory of gravity, which is accepted by pretty much every human being alive, thus true, justified belief, thus

knowledge. At this point, the skeptic would then ask, “how is the theory of gravity justified?” Assumedly, the Coherentist would point to the empirical observations of scientists, satellites, and astronauts (seeing, either by mechanical instruments or their own eyes, the moon orbiting the earth, for example) upon which the theory of gravity is based and justified. Essentially then, you know the moon orbits the earth because the theory of gravity says so, and the theory of gravity says so because the moon orbits the earth. The argument makes sense, until you think about it. It basically proves nothing unless you accept one of the two claims as true, without justification. Otherwise you could endlessly go back and forth from the first claim to the second, or until you got dizzy. Either way though, it fails to satisfy the skeptical challenge.

The skeptic’s job is basically done here in that neither the Foundationalist nor the Coherentist could successfully meet his challenges, but just for fun, or maybe to rub it in, the skeptic can take this opportunity to present his own theory of knowledge. To reiterate the skeptical position, the skeptic does not deny the possibility that knowledge as true, justified belief exists, nor does he deny the possibility that we, as humans, can attain such knowledge. What he does deny, however, is that in this point in human history, we are capable of knowing, to a certainty, that we have knowledge. The question then, is that in light of the failure of both Foundationalism and Coherentism, what solution is left?

The primary contention of a skeptical theory focuses on the definition of knowledge as true, justified belief. The skeptic concedes that, as the Foundationalist contends, absolute certainty is necessary to establish truth. Also, the skeptic concedes that, as the Coherentist contends, human knowledge is fallible, and therefore certainty is an impossibility in the absence of a God’s eye view. Now, since certainty is an impossibility absent a God’s eye view, and certainty is a necessary condition for truth, it stands to reason then that it is impossible for a

human being to *know*, with absolute certainty, what the truth is. Furthermore, as the Coherentist idea of indefeasible justification relies on the assumption that human beings can know the truth, indefeasible justification is an impossibility as well. So, truth in terms of certainty and/or indefeasible justification, as necessary conditions for the skeptic's definition of knowledge, is eliminated. While the knowledge of truth is an impossibility for human beings, the probability of probability, however, is not. That is to say that, although we can never be absolutely certain, we can be 99.99% sure.

Furthermore, as justification in the old definition relied on truth in terms of certainty or indefeasibility, justification in this definition now relies on the probability of truth. So just as we can't be 100% certain, but we can be 99.99% sure, we can't be absolutely or indefeasibly justified, but we can be 99.99% justified. Knowledge then, is not defined as true, justified belief, but probably true, probably justified belief. Some could contend that this definition asserts the same principle that fallibilism does, but they would be mistaken. Fallibilism basically claims to know that a claim is true, justified belief, and simultaneously contends that it may not be true, justified belief. The skeptic however, never claims to know that a claim is true, justified belief. Rather, he claims to *probably* know his claim is *probably* be true, *probably* justified belief. The difference may be imperceptible, but it is important. The Fallibilist contradicts himself by simultaneously claiming certainty and conceding uncertainty, whereas the skeptic never claims certainty, only concedes uncertainty.

Now, as the skeptic never claims to know anything, by the definition of knowledge as true, justified belief, his claims are not subject to the skeptical challenge of knowledge. Furthermore, if you were to skeptically challenge the skeptic's claim that the only knowledge that we as human beings can attain is probabilistic, he could point to his own successful skeptical

challenges of Foundationalist and Coherentist theories of knowledge as evidence of the likely probability that his theory is probably true. Therefore, successfully answering your skeptical challenge. Moreover, if you were some how to prove him wrong, that's all right too, because he never claimed to be absolutely sure he was right. It's a win, win situation. It seems then, that skepticism is *probably*, the best epistemological theory out there.