

A Re-evaluation of the Concept of Epistemic Priority

I.

In his 'The Skeptic and the Dogmatist' James Pryor (2000) attempts to refute Cartesian skepticism. His attack is primarily based on G.E. Moore's infamous proof of the existence of an external world. He argues that some beliefs, based on perception, are sufficient to constitute knowledge. This concept of so-called epistemic priority is the focus of my paper.

After a brief overview of Pryor's argumentation, which will cover the classical skeptical argumentation as well as Moore's proof (II), I will criticize his conception of epistemic priority (III). This will lead to undermining the intuitive appeal of immediate *prima facie* justification (IV). Afterwards, I will apply the results of my theoretical considerations to one of Pryor's examples (V). Eventually, I will demonstrate that the charge of dogmatism is sufficient to refute Pryor's argument (VI). In the end, I hope to sufficiently show that the skeptic's position remains unaffected.

II.

The basis for Pryor's attack is the well-known argument originally introduced by Descartes (1996 [1641]). However, he adds an interesting twist which is worth pointing out (Pryor, 2000: 522):

- (1) You are not in a position to know you're not being deceived by an evil demon right now.
- (2) If you are to know anything about the external world on the basis of your current perceptual experiences, then you have to be in a position to know

that you are not being deceived by an evil demon right now.

(3) So, by *modus tollens*, you cannot know anything about the external world on the basis of your current perceptual experiences.

According to Pryor this traditional argument is problematic as (1) is too strong a concession to the skeptic (2000: 522). But more problematic, as I will hopefully show, is his usage of the personal pronoun *you* instead of the neutral *one*, which is more than just a stylistic choice. It is the basis for his so-called 'modest anti-skeptical project', which aims at gaining beliefs and, in consequence, knowledge only to *our* satisfaction (Pryor, 2000: 517). This focus on one's own experience refers back to G.E. Moore's infamous proof of the existence of an external world, which is done, in a strikingly simple manner, '[b]y holding up my two hands, and saying, as I make a certain gesture with the right hand, "[h]ere is one hand", and adding, as I make a certain gesture with the left, "and here is another"' (2000 [1962]: 24). A critical reader might be reluctant to accept this attempt of a proof, as it is not clear how it can constitute an effective reply to the skeptic's challenge. As a matter of fact, it could well have been the case that at the time of making certain gestures with his hands, the Cartesian evil genius is at work, thus letting Moore perform his proof in a state of complete illusion.

III.

In opposition to Pryor, the skeptic denies that one's own perceptions can ever lead to knowledge. Aside from the fact that any mental content can only be regarded as true or false in relation to a specific world configuration, it is doubtful whether someone who is being deceived by an evil genius would ever be able to *know* to have hands, and not just to wrongly assume this to be the case. In fact, such an instance of assumed knowledge can easily be cast into doubt. We just have to imagine that an omniscient observer would in fact be able to know that the person who is being deceived does not possess knowledge but merely claims to do so.

Let us examine Pryor's modified premise (1). We can distinguish two cases:

(4) Without being aware of this fact, all my perceptions are an illusion, inflicted on me by the manipulation of an evil genius.

(5) I know that all of my perceptions are not due to illusions. The fact that I am referring to my perceptions is fully sufficient for this statement.

Even a more reticent rephrasing of (5) cannot avoid the problem that the radical skeptic would hardly be willing to accept Pryor's suggestion, due to the fact that he proposes a kind of perception that per definition eludes the influence of the evil genius. It seems unclear in which way one's individual perceptions should lead to knowledge that is immune to the charges of the skeptic. Hence, it becomes obvious why Pryor calls his approach 'modest', because even if we were willing to grant him that the individual's sensual perceptions are sufficient to form a solid foundation for knowledge – Descartes would speak of a *fundamentum inconcussum* –, he does not indicate how he would counter the possibility of the influence of an evil genius. He obviously believes to have solved this problem by referring to his so-called 'dogmatism regarding sensual perceptions', which he bases on the aforementioned proof of Moore (Pryor, 2000: 518). Therefore, he proposes that one's own experience that p leads to the knowledge that p (2000: 520). What he has in mind here is a relation based on dependency (Pryor, 2000: 525):

Your justification for believing p_1 is antecedent to your justification for believing p_2 just in case your reasons for believing p_1 do not *presuppose* or *rest on* your reasons for believing p_2 . Your reasons for believing p_1 can not *beg the question* whether p_2 [italics in the original, G.U.].¹

It remains to be seen how we can arrive at justification for believing p_1 . Obviously we have to be in possession of knowledge that cannot be doubted, because every weaker assumption entails that we might have been potentially misled by an evil genius. To counter this objection, Pryor resorts to *prima facie* justifications,

¹ The problem of circularity is obvious, cf. Lewis (1952: 169): '[N]o logical relationship, by itself, can ever be sufficient to establish the truth, or the credibility even, of any synthetic judgement.'

which, as long as we lack contradictory ordinary evidence, he deems sufficient to justify our beliefs (2000: 535). His proposal, however, is questionable because he is referring to nothing more than common sense. In other words, Pryor does merely claim to be able to arrive at knowledge through sensual perception. While this approach can indeed be regarded as a novelty, it remains to be seen how solid his proposal actually is. The following chapter will therefore deal with his concept of 'immediate *prima facie* justification'.

IV.

Pryor defines 'immediate *prima facie* justification' in opposition to mediate justification (2000: 532):

- (6) You are *mediately justified* in believing *p* iff you are justified in believing *p*, and this justification rests in part on the justification you have for believing other supporting propositions.
- (7) You are 'immediately justified' in believing *p*, on the other hand, iff you're justified in believing *p*, and this justification does not rest on any evidence or justification you have for believing other propositions.

For Pryor the crucial feature of 'immediate *prima facie* justification' is that it 'can be defeated or undermined by additional evidence. But in the absence of any such defeating evidence, *prima facie* justification for believing *p* will constitute all things considered justification for believing *p*' (2000: 534). Furthermore, he contends that one possesses immediate *prima facie* justification for believing *p* whenever one experiences that *p*, which he contrasts with the skeptics position by claiming that one's experiences do not give one immediate *prima facie* justification for the typical skeptical hypotheses that, for instance, one is being deceived by an evil genius (2000: 536).

It is doubtful if his position is tenable. We can surely concede to the anti-

skeptic that she is free to have the conviction that p , based on her own immediate *prima facie* justification. On the other hand, such a position is quite dogmatic, because she just claims her justifications to be sufficient. The best defence at her disposal is to claim to be justified in her beliefs because she is dogmatist in nature, which she considers to be sufficient for solely relying on her perceptions. Of course, such an argument leads nowhere, as it hinges on a person's convictions.² Since Pryor is content to judge only on ordinary evidence (2000: 534), it is hardly surprising that he resorts to a practical example, which I will criticize in the following paragraph.

V.

In order to visualize his position, Pryor devises the following example (2000: 525):

I'm driving my car. I look at the gas gauge and it appears to read 'E'. This gives me justification for believing that I'm out of gas. However, for no good reason, I suspect that I'm hallucinating the gas gauge. So I do not actually form the belief that I'm out of gas, nor do I form the belief that my gas gauge reads 'E'.

The Moorean appeal to common sense in this example is undeniable. Obviously, the driver is prompted to trust the gas gauge, which entails that she has to trust her perceptions. At first sight, this seems perfectly reasonable. There are, however, ways to counter this position.

Firstly, one could object that a solid counterexample against the skeptic should encompass the existence of the *whole* external world. Furthermore, Pryor's choice of the gas gauge in his example seems tendentious, as one might arguably think of a different hierarchy with respect to the external world. At first the existence of the external world as a whole would have to be doubted, and later on one could doubt the existence of the car, which in the end entailed the gas gauge.

² In a more recent article Pryor develops a related but more careful approach by introducing an element of chance (2004: 352): 'I understand justification to be the quality that hypotheses possess for you when they're epistemically likely for you to be true, and so epistemically appropriate for you to believe [italics of the original text removed, G.U.]'

In this respect, Pryor has put the cart before the horse; but only by doing so could he be able to picture the skeptic's argument as nonsensical.

Secondly, Pryor tackles what could be called second-order beliefs which by themselves would not be sufficient to serve as a solid foundation. This is due to the fact that he does nothing more than confirming his perceptions in the following manner: the perception of p leads to the belief that p , which in turn leads to the knowledge that p . This statement finally allows for the charge of dogmatism.

VI.

In his 'An Argument for Skepticism', Peter Unger analyses the problem of certainty in a way that is most beneficial for our present case (2000 [1974]: 44):

[T]he idea that to be absolutely certain of something is, owing to a certain personal certainty, to be *dogmatic* in the matter of whether that thing is so. It is because of this dogmatic feature that there is always *something* wrong with being absolutely certain.

The upshot of Unger's reasoning is that the skeptic has to be right, since nobody can be absolutely certain of anything without being dogmatic. As a consequence, absolute certainty is impossible to achieve (2000 [1974]: 52). A rather quirky example of his, which directly opposes Pryor's, leads to the conviction that one can never be justified in believing anything at all (2000 [1974]: 45):

[Y]ou may be quite sure that I am married. But, you will not be quite so sure that no appearances to the contrary might show up: I may be married but say to you "No, I'm not really married. Mary and I don't believe in such institutions. We only sent out announcements to see the effect – and it's easier to have most people believe that we are." I might, at a certain point, say these things to you and get a few other people to say apparently confirmatory things. All of this, and some more if need be, should and would, I think incline you to be at least a bit less certain that I am married."

Unger certainly makes a powerful point here. It is therefore reasonable to assume that, under certain circumstances, one can never be absolutely certain of anything, because there is always the potential of unearthing contradictory evidence to our beliefs that might undermine our long-held convictions. Thus, we

might have to realise that we wrongly thought something to be the case.

With respect to Pryor's example, one therefore does not have to make the rather eccentric assumption that the display of the gas gauge is a mere hallucination. Let us assume the role of the driver for just a moment. At peace with the world she drives along a highway. Suddenly she realizes that the gas gauge reads 'E', thus indicating a nearly empty tank. Wondering what is wrong with the car, as she completely filled up the tank not long ago, she steers her car towards the nearest gas station. The attendant at the gas station is perplexed as well, as he hardly managed to fill in one gallon. However, he is able to solve our philosophical problem, because he immediately realizes that the gas gauge is defective. As long as the driver chooses not to replace the gas gauge, the deceptions of this instrument will of course continue. In the end, we arrive at a refutation of Pryor's statement that '[t]here is an obvious sense in which my justification for believing that I'm out of gas rests on my justification for believing that the gas gauge reads "E"' (2000: 525). The justification he describes is not unassailable. As I support the skeptic, this is all I need to show. Therefore, I see no way for Pryor to escape Unger's charge that '[n]o matter how comfortable one feels in his philosophy and his view of the world, I can't see how he might properly be *certain* that there is no other way that he could possibly be wrong.' (Unger, 2000 [1974]: 52).

VII.

In the end, it is impossible to arrive at complete certainty, which is the reason why we can refute Pryor's postulated epistemic priority. His dogmatist is unable to say *why* she is convinced of the validity of her sensual perceptions. Therefore, I consider it save to conclude that Pryor's so-called 'modest anti-skeptical project' is flawed, as it can be demonstrated that it is doubtful to claim to be able to gain perfect justification for one's perceptions, because the charge of dogmatism undermines any security one might believe to have. Knowledge is certainly not attainable in such a way.

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