

# A Re-evaluation of the Concept of Epistemic Priority

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## I. Introduction

Pryor (2000) attempts to refute Cartesian skepticism with an argumentation 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 is called 'epistemic priority'.

## II. Pryor's 'modest anti-skeptical project'

Pryor adds a new twist to the original skeptical argument (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.

Ergo: aim at gaining beliefs and, in consequence, knowledge only to *our* satisfaction (Pryor, 2000: 517). Cf. Moore's 'proof'.

## III. Examining Pryor's premisses

Two cases of Pryor's modified premise (1):

- (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.

However, (5) is per definition immune to the influence of the evil genius! Pryor then introduces 'dogmatism regarding sensual perceptions', (2000: 518). Therefore, he proposes that one's own experience that *p* leads to the knowledge that *p* (2000: 520).

## IV. Pryor's concept of '*prima facie* justifications' (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.

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).

## V. Example and Counterexample

Pryor (2000: 525), in a Moorean manner, writes:

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'.

Unger, about a quarter of a century earlier, was not exactly devoid of creativity either (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."

Therefore, 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). Pryor's dogmatic is unable to say why she is convinced of the validity of her perceptions. His 'modest anti-skeptical project' is flawed, as it can be demonstrated that it is doubtful to claim to be able to gain justification for one's perceptions, because the charge of dogmatism undermines any personal conviction one might held.

## References:

- Moore, G.E. 2000 [1962]. 'Proof of an External World'. In: Sosa, Ernest (ed.). *Epistemology: An Anthology*. Oxford: Blackwell: 24-26.
- Pryor, James. 2000. 'The Skeptic and the Dogmatist.' *Noûs* 34: 517-49.
- Unger, Peter. 2000 [1974]. 'An Argument for Skepticism'. In: Ernest Sosa (ed.). *Epistemology: An Anthology*. Oxford: Blackwell: 42-52.