Lecture 6: Skepticism

I. Introduction:
Skeptics come in many varieties. There are local and global varieties. The local varieties focus on some class of knowledge – knowledge about the past, the future, the external world. The global variety holds that we have no knowledge at all.
Skepticism is a disease individuated by its symptoms (such as immoderate protestations of ignorance); we should therefore not assume that it can be caused in only one way.
(Williamson, p. 165)

II. The Skeptical Argument:
This is one popular argument as presented by Susanna Rinard (ms.):
1. One's basic evidence about the external world is restricted to propositions about the way the external world appears to one.
2. Propositions about the way the external world appears to one are evidentially neutral between the Normal World hypothesis and the BIV hypothesis.
3. Neither the Normal World hypothesis nor the BIV hypothesis is intrinsically more worthy of belief, independently of one's evidence.
4. If one neither knows nor is justified in believing Q, and one knows that P entails Q, then one must neither know nor be justified in believing P. (Closure)

For every external world proposition P, no one could ever know or be justified in believing P.

III. Different Strategies to respond to the Skeptic?
Of course, one way to respond to the skeptic is just to argue against one of her premises. Which premise you deny, will depend on which view of justification you favor. One thing that all strategies of denying a particular premise have in common is that the response they aim to give is a diagnostic one: they aim to show not just that the skeptic is wrong but also how she went wrong.

An alternative is to respond to the skeptic by showing that her argument commits her to a reductio. This is a non-diagnostic response, in that it shows that the skeptic must be wrong but without showing where the mistake is.

It's also helpful to distinguish ambitious from less ambitious responses:
Ambitious responses: those try to convince the skeptic, appealing only to premises that the skeptic herself would accept.
Less ambitious responses: those try to convince us that we don't have to be skeptics, appealing to premises that we accept but the skeptic disputes.

Many people think that an ambitious response simply cannot be given:
Nothing said here should convince someone who has given up ordinary beliefs that they [ordinary external world beliefs] constitute knowledge…This is the usual case with philosophical treatments of skepticism: they are better at prevention than at cure. If a refutation of skepticism is supposed to reason one out of the hole, then skepticism is irrefutable. (Williamson)

The ambitious anti-skeptical project is to refute the skeptic on his own terms, that is, to establish that we can justifiably believe and know such things as that there is a hand, using only premises that the skeptic allows us to use. The prospects for this ambitious anti-skeptical project seem somewhat dim… (Pryor)

IV. Denying Premise 1: Williamson
Let’s introduce two cases:

*The Good Case:* You are sitting in the lecture hall enjoying your lecture.

*The Bad Case:* You are a BIV (recently envatted) being stimulated to experience sensations as if you were sitting in the lecture hall enjoying your lecture.

In the Good Case you truly believe that you are sitting in the lecture hall. In the Bad Case you have the same belief but it’s false.

According to the skeptic, in the Good Case and in the Bad Case your belief is based on the same evidence. But why grant this assumption?

The sceptic cannot simply stipulate that one has the same evidence in the good and bad cases. [...] Rather, the sceptic should define the bad case in less contested terms, so that its possibility is agreed, and then argue for the lemma that one has the same evidence in it as in the good case. (Williamson, p. 169)

Note that externalists in particular will be unsympathetic to this assumption. Why? Because admitting it amounts to admitting that we are in the same epistemic position in the Good Case and in the Bad Case. But that’s contrary to the spirit of externalism: according to externalists, what matters for epistemic status is (some kind of) reliability. But of course, my epistemic position is not the same in the Good Case and in the Bad Case. In the Good Case my beliefs are reliably formed; in the Bad Case they are not.

What kind of argument can the skeptic give in support of Premise 1?

Suppose that one has different evidence in the two cases. Then one can deduce in the bad case that one is not in the good case, because one’s evidence is not what it would be if one were in the good case. But even the sceptic’s opponent agrees that it is consistent with everything one knows in the bad case that one is in the good case. Therefore, one has the same evidence in the two cases. (Williamson, p. 170)

This argument relies on a crucial assumption: that rational thinkers are always in a position to know what their evidence is.

The appeal of that assumption is by no means limited to sceptics; after all, it says that rational thinkers are in a position to know something. The idea...is that rationality requires one to respect one’s evidence, which one cannot expect to do without knowing what it is.

Williamson argues that this assumption is false. Rational thinkers are not always in a position to know what their evidence is:

Whatever evidence is, one is not always in a position to know what one has of it.

(Williamson, p. 178)

Williamson’s argument relies on Sorites Series. The upshot is quite dramatic: if we are not always in a position to know what evidence we have, we are not always in a position to know what we know. We are also not always in a position to know what rationality requires of us.

If the assumption is false, then one important argument for sameness of evidence in the Good and Bad Cases fails.

**VII. Readings**


Rinard, Susanna. (ms.) “Reasoning One’s Way Out of Skepticism”

