Philosophy 3340 - Epistemology

Topic 3 - Skepticism

Michael Huemer on Skepticism

Chapter III of *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception*: **"Easy Answers to Skepticism"**

1. Is Skepticism Self-Refuting?

1. Mike Huemer points out that regardless of what may be the case with regard to radical, universal skepticism, **skepticism about the external world** is not self-refuting.

2. He then goes on to argue that radical, universal skepticism is self-refuting, not because it is self-contradictory, but because "its truth would entail our *lack of justification* for asserting it." (28)

3. The gist of Mike Huemer's argument is that the universal skeptic will not be able to claim either that his or her premises are justified, or that, given those premises, the conclusion is justified.

4. A crucial point is that the universal skeptic cannot even advance a *reductio ad absurdum* argument, since this presupposes that deductive reasoning is a justified method of arriving at beliefs.

Comment

      I think that Mike Huemer is right about radical, universal skepticism.

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5. One conclusion that Mike Huemer wants to draw is that the first two skeptical arguments considered in the previous chapter are self-refuting, since they are defenses of universal skepticism.

Comment

1. Those two arguments can be recast, however, so that they are defenses not of radical, universal skepticism, but of skepticism with regard to the external world.

2. This can be done, in the case of the infinite regress argument, by holding that some propositions expressing **necessary** truths can be **non-inferentially justified**.

3. Similarly, in the case of the "problem of the criterion" argument, one can hold, first, that self-contradictory propositions are necessarily false, and, secondly, that the form of a proposition is something that one can directly recognize.

2. The G. E. Moore Shift and Michael Huemer's Argument

1. Mike Huemer points out that G. E. Moore actually responds to Hume's argument for skepticism – in "Hume's Theory Examined" (in *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*).

2. Mike Huemer's goal in this section is to set out an argument to show that skeptical arguments cannot succeed against common sense beliefs.

3. Earlier, common sense beliefs were defined as follows:

"i.   They are accepted by almost everyone (except some philosophers and some madmen) regardless of what culture or time period one belongs to.

"ii.   They tend to be taken for granted in ordinary life . . . .

"iii.   If a person believes a contrary to one of these propositions, then it is a sign of insanity." (18)

Comments

(1) It is very important to notice that Mike Huemer's definition of common sense beliefs is *not* a definition of what it is to be a common sense belief at some specific time *t*. Thus he does not say, for example, that for the belief that *p* to be a common sense belief **at time *t***, *p* must have been accepted by almost everyone **at every time up to and including time *t***. What he defines is a non-temporally-indexed concept of "common sense belief", according to which to be a common sense belief, *p* must be accepted by almost everyone at every time, past, present, **and future**.

(2) To know (or be justified in believing), then that the belief that there are rocks is a common sense belief, one must know (or be justified in believing) that the belief that there are rocks will be accepted by almost everyone in the future.

(3) The fact that the belief that *p* has been accepted by almost everyone at every time up to an including time *t* does not therefore entail that *p* is a common sense belief. Does knowing that *p* has been accepted by almost everyone at every time up to an including time *t* it **justify** one in believing, at time *t*, that *p* is a common sense belief? If not, what more is required?

(4) Suppose that *p* has been accepted by almost everyone at every time up to and including time *t*, and will also be accepted by almost everyone at every time in the future, whereas while *q* has been accepted by almost everyone at every time up to and including time *t*, it will not be accepted by almost everyone at every time in the future. Is it necessarily the case that there must be something that enables one to be justified in believing, at time *t*, that *p* will be accepted by everyone in the future, whereas *q* will not be? If so, what would that be?

(5) The underlying question, in short, is this. Among the beliefs that have been accepted by almost everyone at every time up to and including the present moment, how does one tell which of those are common sense beliefs and which are not, and thus which of those beliefs have the highest level of initial plausibility, and which do not?

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4. The defense against skepticism that Mike offers here involves the following argument:

"1. Given a conflict between two beliefs, it is rational to reject the less initially plausible one, rather than the more plausible one.
2. Common sense beliefs have the highest level of initial plausibility.
3. Philosophical theories do not.

4. Therefore, given a conflict between a philosophical theory and common sense, it is rational to reject the philosophical theory, rather than common sense."   (36)

5. In support of the second premise, that is

Common sense beliefs have the highest level of initial plausibility

Mike argues that while massive scientific testimony could convince you that something like the Theorem of Pythagoras was false, it would not convince one, for example, that there were no rocks.

Comments

(1) It is not true that all common sense beliefs have the highest level of plausibility, since some common sense beliefs have a higher level of plausibility than others. For example, my common sense belief that I am now having experiences has a higher plausibility for me that my common sense belief that I am now seeing a desk. Moreover, my treating the former belief as more plausible than the latter is surely justified, since the truth of the latter belief entails the truth of the former, but not vice versa.

(2) Similarly, the common sense belief that there are other human bodies should have a higher initial plausibility for one than the common sense belief that those bodies have minds that enjoy experiences.

(3) Scientific testimony has convinced people that some beliefs that **were** common sense beliefs are false. Thus it was once a common sense belief that a quality with which normal perceivers are directly acquainted – namely, the occurrent, sensible property of redness – was a quality out there on the surfaces of objects such as ripe tomatoes. If physics is right, there is no reason for believing that there is any such property on the surfaces of ripe tomatoes.

(4) Other common sense beliefs that science has given us good reason for abandoning are, for example, the belief that when one touches an orange, the matter in one's hand comes in contact with the matter in the orange, and the belief that most of the space occupied by a coin is occupied by matter in the coin.

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6. In support of the third premise, that is

Philosophical theories do not have the highest level of initial plausibility

Mike argues that the disagreement over philosophical claims shows that they do not have the highest level of initial plausibility.

Comments

(1) Mike Huemer refers here to philosophical **theories**.

(2) It is true that philosophical theories do not generally elicit a high level of agreement, and it is fair to say that that shows that philosophical theories do not possess the highest level of initial plausibility.

(3) On the other hand, there can be philosophical claims that do not involve philosophical theories in an ordinary sense, and that may have very high initial plausibility, so one needs to consider the possibility of a collision between such philosophical claims and common sense beliefs.

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3. A First General Point: Philosophical *Theories* Versus Philosophical *Claims*

1. Consider the following claims:

> (a) Reality consists of nothing except God plus finite immaterial minds and their mental states.

> (b) Berkeley's theory is not significantly more complex than the theory that there are mind-independent external objects.

> (c) The predictions of Berkeley's theory are the same as the predictions of the theory that there are mind-independent objects.

> (d) If two theories S and T generate the same observational predictions, and theory S is only slightly more complex than T, then the ratio of the *a priori* probability of S to that of the *a priori* probability of T will be only slightly different from one.

> (e) The *a priori* probability of Berkeley's theory is not significantly lower than the *a priori* probability of the theory that there are mind-independent objects.

> (f) Bayes's Theorem is true. (Or: The definition of conditional probability is consistent.)

Only the first of these would naturally be characterized as a philosophical **theory**. At the same time, the other four claims are very relevant to the question of the epistemic status of the first.

2. To see this, let us introduce the following abbreviations:

> m = Berkeley's view of the world is correct.

> p = There is a world of mind-independent objects.

> e = The totality of the sensory experiences that will exist if the theory that there is a world of mind-independent objects is true are thus and so.

> $\text{Prob}(q)$ = the *a priori* probability that q is the case.

> $\text{Prob}(q, r)$ = the probability that q is the case given that r is the case.

If claims (b), (c), and (d) above are correct, or at least near enough, then it is the case that

(1) If $\text{Prob}(m)/\text{Prob}(p)$ is less than one, it is **only slightly less** than one.

> But by the definition of conditional probability, one has that

(2) $\text{Prob}(m/e) \times \text{Prob}(e) = \text{Prob}(m \ \& \ e) = \text{Prob}(e/m) \times \text{Prob}(m)$

> and, similarly, that

(3) $\text{Prob}(p/e) \times \text{Prob}(e) = \text{Prob}(p \& e) = \text{Prob}(e/p) \times \text{Prob}(p)$

But in view of the definition of "e", we have that

(4) $\text{Prob}(e/p) = 1$

But then, in view of (c) above, we must also have

(5) $\text{Prob}(e/m) = 1$

Substituting 5 and 4 into 2 and 3 then gives us, respectively:

(6) $\text{Prob}(m/e) \times \text{Prob}(e) = \text{Prob}(m)$

and

(7) $\text{Prob}(p/e) \times \text{Prob}(e) = \text{Prob}(p)$

Dividing equation 6 by equation 7 then yields

(8) $\text{Prob}(m/e)/\text{Prob}(p/e) = \text{Prob}(m)/\text{Prob}(p)$

But this means, in view of its being the case that if $\text{Prob}(m)/\text{Prob}(p)$ is less than one, it is only slightly less than one, that

(9) $\text{Prob}(m/e)/\text{Prob}(p/e)$ is only slightly less than one.

In short, the *a posteriori* probability that Berkeley's view of reality is correct, relative to the totality of experiences that one has is **only slightly less** than the *a posteriori* probability that there is a world of mind-independent physical objects.

3. Notice the following important contrast. If Berkeley's view of the world is true, that is a **contingent** truth. In contrast, claims (b) through (f), if true, are **necessary** truths.

4. This is very important. For necessary truths can have an initial plausibility that is greater than that of a common sense belief such as that there are rocks. In addition, even in the case of necessary truths whose **initial** plausibility is not especially high, investigation can show that the proposition in question is extremely plausible, and more plausible than common sense beliefs concerning the external world.

5. To sum up, then, it is a mistake to think that the only way of challenging a common sense belief is by opposing it by a philosophical **theory**. One can instead appeal to philosophical claims that do not involve advancing any philosophical theories, and argue that those claims lead to the conclusion that a certain common sense belief does not have the probability that is being assigned to it. Moreover, the philosophical claims in question may be necessary truths, and they can have an initial plausibility that is higher than that of common sense beliefs about the external world.

4. A Second General Point: *Inferential* Versus *Non-Inferential* Beliefs

1. The **vast majority** of common sense beliefs are **inferential** beliefs. Thus, for example, in the case of beliefs about **present, but not currently perceived** objects, all such beliefs rest upon everyday **conservation principles**.

2. Even if one confines oneself beliefs about **currently perceived** objects, those beliefs typically go beyond what one is directly acquainted with, in the following ways:

(a) One believes that the things one sees are **not facades**.

(b) One believes that the things one sees have **insides** of a certain sort.

(c) One believes that the things one sees have **tactile qualities**.

(d) One believes that others would also see the things one sees if they were present.

(e) One believes that the things one sees **would exist** even if one were not seeing them.

3. When beliefs are **inferential**, the fact that their plausibility is not substantially reduced by **certain** sorts of challenges is compatible with its being the case that challenges **specifically directed against the underlying inferences** may radically reduce their plausibility.

4. When a common sense belief is inferential, it is apparent that the plausibility of that belief is a function of the plausibility of the inference involved, and it may then very well be the case that, confronted with a competing inference, leading to an incompatible conclusion, one's estimate of the plausibility of the original inference – and so also of the original belief – plummets.

5. Suppose, in particular, that the following things turned out to be true:

(a) Our beliefs about external objects that we are currently perceiving are inferential beliefs.

(b) The inference is an inference to the best explanation.

(c) Berkeley's theory does not differ much from the theory of physical objects with regard to simplicity.

Then it would seem that the plausibility of the theory that there is a spacetime world containing mind-independent physical objects should drop very significantly.

5. Some Specific Cases to Consider: Candidate Common Sense Beliefs

If this argument is sound, then it is always rational, given a conflict between a philosophical theory and common sense, to reject the philosophical theory, rather than common sense. Is this true?

To see whether this is right, let's consider some candidates for common sense beliefs, along with some incompatible philosophical theories. Here are some possibilities:

(1) The belief that a certain ripe tomato is red, where this is understood as the belief that a young child would have about the color property of the surface of a ripe tomato.

Competing philosophical theory: Physics is a complete theory of the external world.

(2) The belief that there are mind-independent physical objects.

Competing philosophical theory: Idealism.

(3) The belief that human behavior is not causally determined.

Competing philosophical theory: Determinism.

(4) The belief that non-human mammals have experiences.

Competing philosophical theory: Animals have only physical properties. (Compare Descartes.)

(5) The belief that **decisions** to perform an action are not caused by earlier states of affairs.

Competing philosophical theory: Decisions are caused by earlier, purely physical events.

(6) The belief that **experiences** can causally make a difference with regard to the way that one's body moves.

Competing philosophical theory: Epiphenomalism.

(7) The belief that there are objective facts concerning the rightness and wrongness of actions, and that we can have knowledge of such objective values.

Competing philosophical theories: Moral irrealism and moral skepticism.

With regard to each of these pairs of a suggested common sense belief, and a competing and incompatible philosophical theory, there are three questions that one needs to ask:

First, are the "competing philosophical theories" that I have mentioned philosophical theories?

Secondly, is the belief in question a common sense belief **in Mike's sense**?

Thirdly, if it is, is Mike right in holding that it is impossible for there to be a an argument that would give us good reason to reject the common sense belief in favor of the competing philosophical theory?

As regards the first question, it certainly seems to me that what I have labelled "competing philosophical theories" are indeed such. Does anyone think that in some of the above cases this is not so?

The second and third questions call for more discussion, so let's consider each candidate in turn.

Candidate 1: Colors, as a child would understand them, are real, and are properties of the surfaces of objects.

Competing philosophical theory: Physics is a complete theory of the external world.

1. What are young children saying when they say that a tomato is red? One thing that they are clearly **not** saying is this:

(1) "Ripe tomatoes have the power to absorb that following wavelengths of light . . . and reflect the following wavelengths of light . . . ."

But it also seems clear that they are also **not** saying this:

(2) "Ripe tomatoes have the power to produce experiences in normal observers under normal conditions that have the quality of redness."

For while it may be argued that arriving at the belief that is expressed by this sentence does not, in contrast to what is so in the case of (1), require specialized scientific knowledge, this is not the belief that people naturally acquire. The belief that people

do naturally acquire involves the concept of a sensible property of redness – where by this I mean the property that Mary of Frank Jackson's "knowledge argument" is aware of when she learns what redness is. When a child says that a tomato is red, it is this **sensible**, **non-dispositional** property that is being attributed to the surface of the tomato. Redness is a property with which a child is **directly acquainted**, and in such a way that **the child, like Mary, knows what redness is**. It is not, as Armstrong contends, some property about whose intrinsic nature one knows nothing.

In short, there is a certain property with which a child is directly acquainted – the property of redness – and a child, in believing that a ripe tomato is red, believes that that the surface of the tomato has **that** property.

Is this a common sense belief? One might object that it is not, on the grounds that one does not **now** have to be a philosopher or a madman to reject it. But this defense seems unsound to me. For suppose that one goes back a few hundred years, and ignores certain parts of Asia. It would surely have been **reasonable** then to have viewed the belief as a common sense belief. But then, if Mike Huemer's argument were sound, it would have been reasonable at that time to continue to accept that common sense belief when it came into conflict with a philosophical argument, as it did. But, in fact, those who are familiar with the relevant scientific information have almost universally come to hold that ripe tomatoes do **not** have the sensible, non-dispositional property of redness.

The upshot is that the belief that things are colored in the relevant sense was once a common sense belief, but it has been abandoned by almost everyone who is familiar with the relevant scientific facts. So some common sense beliefs have succumbed to philosophical argument based on well-established scientific premises.

Candidate 2: There are mind-independent physical objects.

Competing philosophical theory: Idealism.

Is this a common sense belief, in Mike's sense? My argument for the claim that, contrary to Mike's view, it is not, is as follows:

(1) Hinduism, which is the religion of over 600 million people, involves the idea of **maya**, where this is the view that there is no physical world, that what one has is, instead, an illusion.

(2) An enormous number of Hindus affirm this belief, and there is nothing in their behavior that provides a reason for thinking that they are wrong in this self-attribution.

(3) These people are not all either philosophers or mad.

(4) Accordingly, the belief that there are mind-independent physical objects is not a common sense belief in Mike's sense.

Mike's response to this argument was that he found it hard to believe that people really believed the doctrine of maya. It seems to me immensely more likely that many, many Hindus are right in this self-attribution than that Mike is right in his denial that they have this belief.

In addition, however, compare the following beliefs:

(a) There is a perfectly loving, all powerful, and all knowing being who created and who rules over our world.

(b) There is some being who has produced a grand illusion that people experience.

The first of these propositions seems to me **much** more likely to be false, given the immense suffering that both innocent persons – including children – and animals undergo, than the second. But the first proposition is nevertheless affirmed by an extremely large number of people. So why should one accept Mike's view that Hindus do not really accept the second belief?

More generally, religious beliefs often come as a package deal, with the result that people accept beliefs that are immensely implausible – such as the belief that the earth is only a few thousand years old – because they view those beliefs as an essential part of a total view of the world that they find appealing.

Finally, there is a type of experience that is found in all, or virtually all, cultures – namely, **introvertive mystical experiences**. Moreover, in the description of such experiences that is, arguably, most free of the importation of prior beliefs – namely, the monistic account offered in Eastern religions, as contrasted with the monotheistic account offered by Christian mystics – a central aspect of the experience is **the sense** that **the world of space and time is not real**. The Hindu doctrine of maya is largely based, I believe, on such introvertive mystical experiences.

The second issue is this. **If**, contrary to what I have just argued, the belief that there is a world of mind-independent physical objects were a common sense belief in Mike's sense, **could it be defended against skeptical challenges by Mike's argument**?

Mike's argument appeals to the idea that common sense beliefs are characterized by the "highest level of initial plausibility".   But judgments of plausibility are judgments of probability. How reliable are ordinary judgments of probability?

Some judgments of probability are based upon observations of **relative frequencies**, and such judgments may be relatively sound. But in the present case, there is no information about relative frequencies that bears upon the issue. So what we are being asked by Mike to do is to view, as very reliable, judgments of probability that, first of all, are not based upon relative frequencies, secondly, are being made by people without serious consideration of competing hypotheses – such as the mystically-based doctrine of maya – and, thirdly, that are judgments that Mike himself is unable to support by appealing to principles of probability or inductive logic.

Candidate 3: The belief that human behavior is not causally determined.

Competing philosophical theory: Determinism.

Is this a common sense belief? I think that it is, since I think that it is natural to think that, at any given time, one could, for example, either move one's hand to the right, or move it to the left. Moreover, one does not, initially, seem to have any reason at all for thinking that, on the contrary, what one does is in fact causally determined.

Is it then true that science could no more convince one that this belief was false than it could convince one that there were no rocks?

This does not seem right. For couldn't it have been the case that the correct theory of physics was Newtonian, and so deterministic? Or mightn't present, indeterministic theories in quantum mechanics be replaced at some point by a deterministic theory?

It might be objected that what physicists would have shown, in such cases, would be only that determinism held with regard to **inanimate objects**. But couldn't the work of physicists be supplemented by neurophysiological experiments that established that events taking in place in the brain conformed to the deterministic laws discovered by physicists? If so, then this third belief would be shown to be false.

Candidate 4: The belief that non-human mammals have experiences.

Competing philosophical theory: Animals have only physical properties.

Is it a **common sense belief** that cats and dogs have experiences? It would certainly seem that it is.

Is it true, then, that a philosophical argument based on scientific findings could not give one good reason for abandoning this belief in favor of the Cartesian belief that non-human animals are physical automata without experiences? It seems to me that it is not. For imagine that, in the case of human beings, neurophysiological investigations locate a "visual experience module" such that, when this is damaged, the human in question, while having a dramatic type of blindsight, reports having no visual experiences at all. Suppose that comparable modules are found for all of the other senses. Suppose, finally, that nothing in the brains of non-human mammals corresponds to this part of the human brain, and that the structures in all parts of the brains of non-human animals correspond to structures in human brains that are **not** sufficient for the having of experiences. Would not information along these lines make it reasonable to conclude that while non-human animals behave as if they had conscious experiences, in fact consciousness only emerges with the development of certain neuronal structures that are only present in the human brain, so that Descartes was right, and non-human mammals do not have experiences of any kind?

Candidate 5: The belief that decisions to perform an action are not caused by earlier, purely physical states of affairs.

Competing philosophical theory: Decisions are caused by earlier, purely physical events.

Is this a common sense belief? Again, I think that it is. One is aware of a conscious process of considering alternative actions, and the pros and cons of each. Then, at a certain point, there is a conscious experience of making a decision, and it seems very natural to think of that occurrence as one that is not caused by some earlier, purely physical event.

Some scientists have reported, however, that there are brain events that take place a very short time before the conscious experience of making a decision – events which they think it reasonable to view as causally giving rise to the conscious experience. Thus Michel S. Gazzaniga, in his book *The Mind's Past* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1998), says in chapter 3, "The Brain Knows Before You Do", that experiments by Benjamin Libet and other scientists have shown, for example, that there is a delay of up to half a second between a stimulus's arriving

in the brain and one's conscious awareness of the stimulation in question.[i] He also claims that experiments have shown that when one consciously decides to do something, the brain has already started to perform the relevant action:

"Using another method of recording, Libet determined that brain potentials are firing three hundred fifty milliseconds before you have the conscious intention to act. So before you are aware that you're thinking about moving your arm, your brain is at work preparing to make that movement." (*The Mind's Past*, page 73)

Gazzaniga's descriptions of the relevant experiments are very brief, and often not easy to follow, so I think that one would really need to go back and look at the original descriptions of the experiments before one could be at all confident that the experiments do justify the conclusion that is being drawn from them. But suppose that they do not. Surely it is still true that one can **imagine** experiments that **would** show, for example, that there were purely physical events that always preceded conscious processes of coming to a decision, and where the precise nature of the preceding physical state enabled someone who did not know what decision the person had made to calculate, correctly, what the person's decision had in fact been. Would it not be reasonable, at that point, to abandon the common sense belief in favor of the competing philosophical theory that events that involve the consciousness of coming to a decision are caused by earlier, purely physical events?

Candidate 6: The belief that experiences can causally make a difference with regard to the way that one's body moves.

Competing philosophical theory: Epiphenomalism.

Is this a common sense belief? It certainly seems to me that it is. When one, for example, tastes something, and one is asked how it tastes, surely it is extremely natural to think that the quality of the experience that one is having plays an essential causal role in determining the words that one utters in answering the question of how it tastes.

Is it true, then, that an argument for the competing philosophical theory of epiphenomenalism could not prevail against this common sense belief? Again, this does not seem right. As with the case of Candidate 3 above, it would seem that, on the one hand, physicists could show that determinism held with regard to inanimate objects, and then cognitive scientists could establish, via extensive neurophysiological experiments, that events taking in place in the brain were not exceptions to the deterministic laws discovered by physicists. If this is so, then the common sense belief that experiences can make a difference with respect to how humans behave could be shown to be false.

Candidate 7: The belief that there are objective facts concerning the rightness and wrongness of actions, and that we can have knowledge of such objective values.

Competing philosophical theories: Moral irrealism and moral skepticism.

Is this a common sense belief? Again, it seems to me very plausible that it is. For one thing, have anthropologists ever found a society where people did not have beliefs that some actions are morally wrong? For another, though many people

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[i] Benjamin Libet, "Do We Have Free Will?", *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 6/8-9, pages 47-57.

question the existence of objective values, it is generally the case that when certain issues arise, they do not treat those who disagree with them as simply having different preferences that are no more problematic than their own.

Is it true that this common sense belief is secure, and should prevail in any challenge from moral irrealism or moral skepticism? Again, this does not seem to me true. Consider, for example, the argument from the cultural relativity of values against the view that there are objective values. The normal response to this argument is to draw a distinction between basic moral principles and derived ones, and to argue that the moral disagreements that one finds between different societies are, on the whole, disagreements about derived moral principles. This response, however, is by no means unproblematic, since there seem to be a number of cases where there is disagreement concerning basic moral principles, sometimes involving **very** firm intuitions on both sides. Here are a few examples:

(1) The enjoyment of sexual pleasure is only morally permissible within marriage, and when the sexual activity in question is one that is open to the possibility of conception.

(2) The direct killing of any innocent human being, regardless of his or her condition, and regardless of whether he or she asks to be killed, is always seriously wrong.

(3) There are some actions that should never be performed, regardless of the consequences.

(4) The killing of potential persons is morally on a par with the killing of persons.

(5) Killing and letting die are morally on a par.

(6) Suicide is morally wrong, even in cases where one is terminally ill and suffering terribly.

(7) The use of mind-altering drugs is morally wrong.

(8) People who have intentionally killed others when it was wrong to do so should be executed.

(9) We have no obligations with regard to future generations.

(10) Affluent countries have no obligations with regard to people starving to death in other countries.

(11) To each according to his needs.

(12) Goods should be distributed in accordance with desert.

These disagreements, all of which I think are most likely to be disagreements about basic moral principles – that is, disagreements about rightmaking and wrongmaking, or goodmaking and badmaking properties – are disagreements about extremely important issues. Would one expect such disagreements if there were objective values to which people had cognitive assess? Wouldn't one rather expect that the level of disagreement would be more on a par with what there is, say, in the case of the colors, or shapes, of objects?

It seems to me, then, that the argument from relativity poses a strong prima facie challenge to the claim that there are objective moral values to which humans have cognitive access.

There are, in addition, other challenges. One is that it seems clear that the inculcation of moral values by parents in their children can produce extremely firm moral opinions that seem unrelated to the truth or falsity of the belief in question. Consider, for example, the Biblical views that women who are not virgins when they are married should be stoned to death, or that homosexuals should be put to death, or that people who have sex with animals should be executed. If there are objective values, these particular moral beliefs are, I would hope, false. But when people introspect, carefully and conscientiously, are they able to detect any difference between those moral beliefs and others that, if there are moral values, one would hope are true – such as that killing innocent people is *prima facie* seriously wrong?

One might compare, here, the case of arithmetic. Imagine parents who inculcate in their children the belief that Fermat's Last Theorem is false. Would such children claim to be able to 'see' that Fermat's Last Theorem is false in just the way that they can see, for example, that 2 + 2 = 4? Isn't there something phenomenologically special about one's recognition of simple mathematical truths?

In short, it seems to me that it is not at all clear that the common sense belief that there are objective values to which one has cognitive access will not, in the end, turn out to be such as should be abandoned in the face of relevant philosophical arguments.

6. Concluding Comments on the G. E. Moore/Mike Huemer Argument

(1) It is not true, as Mike Huemer claims, that in a conflict between common sense views and philosophical theories, common sense views should prevail on the grounds that common sense views "have the highest level of initial plausibility", while competing philosophical theories do not.

(2) One reason is related to Bertrand Russell's remark, which he made with regard to color and the manifest image version of naïve realism, to the effect that the manifest image version of naïve realism leads to the belief that physics is true, which in turn leads to the conclusion that the manifest image version of naïve realism is false. The point, then, is simply that **some** common sense beliefs involve observations that serve to support scientific theories that, in the end, are ultimately very firmly established indeed, and where some of those scientific theories then can be used by philosophers to argue that **other** common sense views are false.

(3) The picture that emerges is that even if common sense views are often both natural and reasonable initially, they are typically based upon a very limited range of considerations. Much broader considerations, often involving much deeper observations, are often evidentially relevant to common sense beliefs, and, because of this, philosophical theories that appeal to such considerations can perfectly well turn out to be more reasonable than the relevant common sense beliefs with which they conflict.

7. Stroud's Defense

1. Stroud's criticism of Moore's response to skepticism is not as clear as it might be from Mike Huemer's account, but the basic idea seems to be as follows:

(1) If a claim is challenged by directing an objection against **an argument** on which the claim rests, that objection needs to be answered: reiterating the claim is worthless.

(2) Moore needs to consider where the claims that he is defending stand in a structure of epistemic justification, and this he totally fails to do.

2. Mike Huemer introduces, at this point the idea that some beliefs may be justified on the basis of other beliefs. (38)

4. He also says that **psychological certainty** counts for nothing if the belief in question rests upon an argument that an objection has been directed against. (39)

5. Mike Huemer grants, accordingly, that "to the extent that the skeptic is able to identify specific deficiencies, or alleged deficiencies, in the justification of common sense beliefs", "Moore cannot prove that beliefs about the external world are justified, in the face of the skeptic's objections, by simply appealing to his 'knowledge' that this is a pencil." (40)

6. Nevertheless, Mike Huemer says that he sides with Moore against Stroud.

7. His reason for doing so is connected with the idea that epistemic justification is not a 'one-direction' relationship.

8. The crucial idea that Mike Huemer appeals to is that "the unreasonableness of a conclusion calls into question the reasoning leading to it." (41)

9. Mike Huemer then claims that the "conclusion that no one ever knows anything, or that no one ever knows anything about the physical world, is no more plausible prima facie than the conclusion that nothing ever moves, or that the earth is only 32 miles in circumference." (42)

Comments

(1) The idea that an implausible conclusion provides one with a good reason for thinking that one's reasoning may well have gone astray is not in itself unreasonable.

(2) However, it is still true that if the reasoning supporting one's common sense beliefs has been challenged, one must answer that challenge **by defending the reasoning**.

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10. Mike Huemer concludes his discussion in this section by pointing to the following differences between Stroud's case of the detective and his assistant, and Moore's response to skepticism:

(1) The assistant's belief is not one that it is at all close to being a common sense belief.

(2) The detective is challenging an isolated belief held by his assistant, whereas the skeptic is challenging an enormous set of beliefs.

(3) The detective's criticism of his assistant's belief does not involve controversial premises, whereas the skeptic's criticism of knowledge claims does involve claims that, though not without some plausibility, are controversial.

Comments

(1) I don't think that there is anything objectionable in the idea that it is likely that principles that, if right, lead to the conclusion that a massive set of beliefs are wrong, are **very likely** to be wrong.

(2) But that thought should never replace a close examination of the principles in question, and if, after that examination, the principles in question still seem right, so that the inferences used to arrive at the common sense beliefs in question still seem faulty, then the common sense principles should be questioned.

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11. Mike Huemer's basic contention here is as follows:

> "The point I want to make here is that the Moorean argument, or something very much like it, can supplement and strengthen the presentation of an alternative, nonskeptical theory of knowledge. Once we have two alternative, initially plausible epistemological theories before us, if one of them is consistent with our everyday, prephilosophical beliefs about what people know, while the other one is radically revisionary, this fact becomes a strong argument in favor of the former." (44)

Comments

(1) My view is, first, that one should be able to **establish** which epistemological theory is correct, without using any such argument.

(2) The argument that I set out earlier involved, in effect, the following elements:

> (a) The idea of there being logical probabilities is a sound one, and so there are numbers that are the *a priori* probabilities of the Berkeleian hypothesis, and of the mind-independent world hypothesis.

> (b) The extensive isomorphisms between these two hypotheses, and the fact that the Berkeleian hypothesis is not significantly more complex than the mind-independent world hypothesis makes it likely that the former hypothesis does not have a significantly smaller *a priori* probability than the latter.

> (c) These two metaphysical theories make the same predications with regard to all experiences that humans will have.

> (d) In view of (c), the logical probability of the occurrence of any experience, *E*, should be the same on either hypothesis.

> (e) In view of (b) and (d), the *a posteriori* probability of the Berkeleian hypothesis will not be significantly smaller than the *a posteriori* probability of the mind-independent world hypothesis.

> (f) Given that this is so, one cannot be justified in assigning a probability to the mind-independent world hypothesis that is significantly greater than one half – let alone greater than, say, 0.99.

(3) Notice, too, that any attempt to argue for the view that the *a priori* probability of the Berkeleian hypothesis is **much smaller** than the *a priori* probability of the mind-independent world hypothesis clears the deck for the indirect realist, who can then

argue that an inference to the best explanation argument allows one to assign a high probability to beliefs about a mind-independent world.

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8. Why Study Skepticism?

1. Although Mike Huemer thinks that the two answers to skepticism that he has defended are correct, he thinks that one should not rest content with thus answering skepticism.

2. His reason is that resting content with those answers means that one has not really learned anything positive from the encounter with skepticism.

3. In particular, the above responses do not tell us anything about **precisely what** the mistake is in the case of each of the skeptical arguments set out earlier.

4. Moreover, the principles that are appealed to in skeptical arguments typically are rather plausible, and such as one might well accept if one didn't see them embedded in an argument for skepticism. But if, although those principles seem plausible, one still rejects skepticism, and thus the conclusions of the valid arguments that lead from such principles to skepticism, one's overall epistemological outlook is not consistent.

5. Mike Huemer points out that one's acceptance of principles that entail skepticism mean that, on the one hand, one is embracing, some of the time, very strict standards of justification, whereas the fact that one nevertheless rejects skepticism means that, on the other hand, one is operating some of the time with much looser standards of justification.

6. He then suggests that, besides being unfortunate in itself, this give rise to the danger that one will appeal to the strict standards when confronted with a claim that one doesn't like, while appealing to the loose standards when considering a claim that one likes.

7. Mike Huemer suggests, moreover, that this is not a mere possibility, since "the human capacity for self-deception is both vast and subtle." (47)

8. He suggests, too, that one area in which this operates is morality, where, on the one hand, we often hold that there are no moral truths, while, on the other, we vigorously condemn people who reject certain moral claims.

9. Finally, Mike Huemer claims, first, that one cannot have a satisfactory epistemological theory until one can see precisely what is wrong with the various arguments for skepticism, and, secondly, that an epistemological theory is not satisfactory unless it entails conclusions about precisely where skeptical arguments go wrong.

Comment

All of this strikes me as very plausible, except that I would say, not that an epistemological theory is not satisfactory unless it entails conclusions about precisely where skeptical arguments go wrong, but rather that an epistemological theory is not satisfactory unless either it entails conclusions about precisely where any given skeptical argument goes wrong, or it shows that the skeptical argument in question is correct.