

Ted's Response to External-World Skepticism (Excerpts from ch. 1 of *Self-Reflection for the Opaque Mind*)

[Let us] consider briefly the problem of external-world skepticism.

In an ordinary debate, a question about question-begging can be perfectly apt; for ordinarily, the arguments on each side should start from common ground. But things take an odd shape when debating the external-world skeptic. One such skeptic, by definition, concedes no ground about the external world at all. The shared ground is thus invariably insufficient for vanquishing him. So, simply by being sufficiently uncooperative, the skeptic remains undefeated.

Mooreans [G.E. Moore and his followers] thus ignore this skeptic, insisting that anyone *that* skeptical is intellectually disingenuous, if not insane. (And one *should* ignore the disingenuous or insane!) Regardless, our skeptic can teach us something. The lesson is apparently that one cannot have reasons for beliefs about the external world, without making presumptions about the external world. Let us suppose, nonetheless, that this does not threaten our knowledge of the external world. Still, the skeptical lesson at least raises an explanatory challenge for, e.g., cognitive science. Namely: *Given* that we know the external world, partly on the basis of mere presumptions, *how* do we manage to do that? By what means are we able to know in this presumptuous manner?

In focusing on this explanatory question over traditional skepticism, I show an allegiance to Quine's (1969) *naturalized epistemology*. Yet in the present context, Quine's program is understood a bit differently than is typical. After all, the explanatory question here is not answered by studying the neurology of the brain or the various perceptual mechanisms (though that may be relevant). For what animates the question is a puzzle about our *reasons* for belief, and reasons do not show up on an fMRI scanner (at least, not *qua* reasons). The puzzle again is how we can know about the world despite our reasons being oddly ungrounded or circular. To repeat, it is taken for granted that we *do* know; the question is merely *how*, given the structure of our reasons.¹

For my part, Sellars (1956/1963) answered this in a single, brilliant brushstroke: “[E]mpirical knowledge, like its sophisticated extension, science, is rational, not because it has a *foundation* but because it is a self-correcting enterprise which can put *any* claim in jeopardy, though not *all* at once” (p. 170, his italics). Here, the “foundation” is basically the common ground that we would share with the skeptic. It would consist in certainties, beliefs that one is unable to doubt regarding the external world. The explanatory puzzle arises since we tend to assume that, to know the world, we need noncircular reasons starting from such common ground. But by definition, our skeptic does not concede enough ground for that. Thus, the puzzle.

¹ I take this to be a puzzle only about *reflective* knowledge, not about so-called *animal* knowledge. Cognitive neuroscience alone might very well explain animal knowledge. (The distinction is from Sosa 1985, 2011, etc., yet I would revise Sosa's way of drawing the distinction a bit, in light of sound criticism from Kornblith 2004, 2016.)

Sellars teaches us, however, that this foundationalist conception of knowledge is a mistake. We can suppose that knowledge is true rational belief, yet rational belief need not be *skeptic-immune* belief. It is instead enough if the belief is situated within a “self-correcting enterprise,” a system of beliefs where nothing is adopted dogmatically. Self-correction means “checking” one belief against other beliefs, presumably by how well the one coheres with the others. Accordingly, if a belief creates enough conflict, it is removed. The proposal, then, is that such coherentism is the correct account of what makes a belief “rational,” and shows how true rational belief possible.²

Sellars’ idea still leaves some anxiety. Most notably, it leaves us with (what Bonjour 1985 calls) the “alternative coherent systems” objection. The objector notices that, in principle, vastly different systems could each count as having fully justified or rational beliefs as members. If all that’s required is a certain kind of coherence among the members, that hardly picks out a unique system. This, consequently, raises the concern that a belief’s being “rational” is ultimately not a *truth-conducive* property—it is unclear whether that feature increases the objective likelihood of a belief being true. However, the intuition is that justification must render a belief more objectively probable. After all, we want “justification” to corroborate our choice of belief, vis-à-vis the goal of attaining truths and avoiding falsities.

Without going into detail, the objection is essentially stating the underdetermination of theory by evidence, as made famous by Duhem and Quine. Quine (1951) puts the matter thus:

The totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs...is a [hu]manmade fabric which impinges on experience only along the edges...A conflict with experience at the periphery occasions readjustments in the interior of the field...But the total field is so undetermined by its boundary conditions, experience, that there is much latitude of choice as to what statements to re-evaluate...No particular experiences are linked with any particular statements in the interior of the field, except indirectly through considerations of equilibrium affecting the field as a whole...Any statement can be held true come what may, if we make drastic enough adjustments elsewhere in the system...Conversely, by the same token, no statement is immune to revision. (pp. 39–40)

It may overstate matters to say that the *whole* system is implicated when encountering recalcitrant experience (cf. Quine 1991). However, it is widely accepted that our theories of the world are undetermined by the evidence, along the lines Quine indicates.

So it seems the “alternative coherent systems” objection is not to be resisted as much as admitted, as an important philosophical truth about our epistemic position. Yet the objection stands that a belief’s being “rational” now fails as a truth-conducive property. In reply, however, I follow Quine, who construes the rationality of belief not by its connection to *truth*, but rather in *pragmatic* terms:

² On coherentism, see Quine & Ullian (1970/1978), Sellars (1973), Rescher (1973; 1979), Lehrer (1974; 1989a, b; 2000; 2003), Bonjour (1985; 1989), Harman (1986), and Lycan (1988; 1996; 2002; 2012). See also Foley (1987), who explicitly speaks of rational rather than justified belief.

Each man [sic] is given a scientific heritage plus a continuing barrage of sensory stimulation; and the considerations which guide him in warping his scientific heritage to fit his continuing sensory promptings are, where rational, pragmatic. (Quine 1951, p. 43)

Pragmatic desiderata include maximizing “super-empirical virtues” like simplicity, conservativeness, fertility, scope, etc. Such concerns can guide a rational decision among “alternative coherent theories,” even though the super-empirical virtues might not always be truth-conducive. Yet if they allow for rational theory-choice regardless, knowledge again seems possible, despite the circular structure of our reasons. And the point would remain that knowledge does not require a skeptic-immune foundation, but rather just a place in a system that implements coherentist self-correction, where the rationality of the whole system ultimately has to do with its pragmatic advantages.

What then of truth and falsity? “Justification” that is not truth-conducive can sound like a contradiction in terms. But this may just indicate we should follow Sellars and Quine in speaking of “rational” rather than “justified” belief. Still, if the rationality of a belief is largely orthogonal to truth, then our means to maximizing truth and minimizing falsity seems not very effective. (Prisoners of The Matrix can just as easily achieve fully “rational” belief, despite being systematically mistaken about the outside world.) However, rational belief is not wholly independent of truth, since consistency is the minimum required on a true theory. (I would argue that that ontological parsimony, judiciously applied, helps us avoid falsity as well. Perhaps the success of science also assures us that we are not entirely off track.) Regardless, a less-than-effective means to truth may be our lot in life, given the ungrounded or circular structure of our reasons. And perhaps truth is not the goal of inquiry as much as a regulative ideal. The more immediate goal, apparently, is to maximize coherence and the super-empirical virtues.³

The preceding sketch is just a sketch; even so, it contains much that is controversial. However, I cannot pursue the debates at this time. The Quine-Sellars view at least offers a minimally tenable way for responding to external-world skepticism (although it is admittedly fairly concessive). Nevertheless, if knowledge is a species of true rational belief, it still reveals how knowledge of the external world is possible, so that despair is not inevitable.

³ This may lead some to conclude that maximizing truth and minimizing falsity cannot *really* be our goal in inquiry. The matter likely depends on what “the goal of inquiry” means exactly. But there is a sense, I think, in which inquiry typically has truth as a goal (perhaps *inter alia*). Though whether that *should* be a goal is yet a further question which I do not address here.

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