

Indefensibility, Skepticism and Conceptual Truth

Philipp Keller, Geneva

It is true of many truths that I do not believe them. It is equally true that I cannot rationally assert of any such truth that it is true and that I do not believe it. Such a claim is indefensible, i.e. for internal reasons unable to convince. I claim that such is the skeptic's predicament, trying to convince us to bracket knowledge claims we have good grounds to take ourselves to be entitled to. An analysis of skepticism as an epidemic rather than epistemic challenge will shed new light on what it is to doubt a proposition and provide us with an analysis of conceptual truths as those which cannot rationally be doubted.

The puzzle of 'Moore's paradox', as I understand it, is to explain why the following sentence, while true for many values of p , is inappropriate to assert;

(1) p , but I do not believe that p

I will discuss two approaches to the puzzle which identify conversational maxims they take to be flouted, criticise them and then present an alternative solution.

The *belief approach* takes " p , but I do not believe that p " to violate the maxim that one should believe what one asserts and then argues that the quoted sentence is unbelievable. The problem with this approach is that it has to claim that believing that one does not believe that p entails that one does not believe that p .

The *knowledge approach*, on the other hand, takes it to violate the maxim that one should only assert what one knows and then argues for its unknowability.

The alternative solution I favour presupposes only that one should believe what one asserts and does not have to rely on the dubious principle that one cannot have false beliefs about what beliefs one lacks.

For any sentence p , to believe that p is to take the actual world to be a possible world where p is true. For any sentence p , to disbelieve that p is to consider it possible that a world which verifies $\neg p$ is actual. What does this considering it possible that $\neg p$ amount to? Call *doxastic alternatives* for a at t scenarios the actuality of which a cannot (indeed should not) rule out given what he takes himself to know at t about the world he takes to be actual (which may or may not be his real actual world). A doxastic alternative for a at t , then, is a way the world might be a cannot exclude at t to be a way the world actually is. If a believes that p , all his doxastic alternatives make p true; if he disbelieves p , one of his doxastic alternatives makes p false, i.e.~they make $\neg p$ true. We do not assume that p has a truth-value in all of a 's doxastic alternatives, neither do we assume that no doxastic alternatives make p both true and false and hence are impossible.

Whenever we say of ourselves that we believe that p , we incur a commitment to the truth that p -- we claim that the real actual world (not only the ones we take to be our actual world) is among our doxastic alternatives. Whenever we learn further truths and acquire true beliefs, we narrow down the range of alternatives, hopefully to an ideal limit where the actual world would be our only last alternative left and we would believe some proposition iff it is true. A self-ascription of knowledge or belief is a claim to the effect that we are prepared to use some proposition as a premise in this process of narrowing down the realm of

what is left open by what we take ourselves to know. A crucial feature of beliefs we claim to have, then, is that they must be entertainable in worlds which are their only doxastic alternative. Any proposition that cannot be believed in such a world immediately disqualifies from the role conferred to it by a self-ascription of belief in it.

What lies at the bottom of indefensibility of " p , but I do not believe that p " is not the transitivity of doxastic alternativeness but the commonly made presupposition that what one says might be true even in a state of complete information. If I utter p , I therefore commit myself to the claim that p might be true even if I knew everything about the actual world there is to know, that is, even if the actual world were my only doxastic alternative.

If you utter p , you must consider it possible that you would believe p even if you had a maximally specific belief set, i.e.~if you would believe all the truths (or, equivalently, disbelieve all the falsehoods). If the world in which we believe them were our only doxastic alternative, belief in " p , but I do not believe that p " would make that world inaccessible to us. A belief in (1) makes the world in which it is held either doxastically inaccessible to itself or contradictory. (1) cannot be rationally believed in worlds which are doxastic alternatives of themselves. Taking a doxastic alternative to be possibly actual as opposed to just merely possible, however, means taking it to be doxastically accessible to itself. So no one can take a doxastic alternative in which (1) is true to be a possible way *his* actual world, the world of the believer, might be. It is instructive to compare " p , but I do not believe that p " to the following:

(2) p , but I do not disbelieve that $\neg p$.

(2) can only be believed in worlds which have only non-reflexive doxastic alternatives. So the believer cannot take the world he takes to be actual to be one of its doxastic alternatives, not even, as in the case of (1), at the price of acknowledging that it is contradictory. He cannot take any world to be its doxastic alternative without foresaking that it may be possibly actual (for if it *were* actual, he could not take it to be actual).

The pragmatic maxim violated by an utterance of (2) is not, as in the case of Moore's paradox, that one should believe what one says but something weaker, i.e. that one should disbelieve what one believes to be false. It is thus unbelievable in a weaker sense than Moore's paradox.

The problem with (2) is not the inappropriateness of uttering it, but that belief in it cannot be taken to be true. The problem is that it can only be true *and* believed in worlds which are 'anti-symmetric', i.e. which are such that every doxastic alternative to them does not have them among its doxastic alternatives.

I think that this interpretation of (2) helps us with what I still take to be the main problem of epistemology: not whether the sceptic is right but why he is wrong. Scepticism seems to have found its niche in philosophical multiculturalism. While still unfashionable, it has become tolerated, or rather ignored. I think sceptics earn better than that. Even given that they cannot be proven wrong, their challenge still demands an answer, if not a treatment. I will argue that the cure to skepticism lies in epidemiology

rather than epistemology: instead of attacking the sceptic head-long, I commend vaccinating our fellow non-sceptics against the virus. The way to go is not to argue that the sceptic is wrong, necessarily wrong or that he cannot be believed, but to show that he cannot convince. Scepticism requires a leap of faith: something we may justifiably refrain from even on the sceptic's own standards.

Sceptics are not very good at mounting positive claims. Instead, they ask questions. I take the skeptic of concern to us to be someone who believes that no one ever knows anything. As we assume him to be rational, he will not qualify this belief of his as knowledge. The sceptic thus thinks that all our beliefs that we know something are false. The question he asks us is the following: "How do you know that you know something?" By taking his question to be rhetorical, he challenges our entitlement to any knowledge claims (claims of the form "I know that p ") whatsoever. To meet the sceptic's challenge, we have to develop an account of knowledge that gives us the resources to defend against the sceptic the claim that we know something.

The question of what to say to the sceptic lands us in a dilemma. The sceptic sketches a sceptical scenario, p , furnishes a description of what he takes to be a possible world in which we would not know what we claim to know. He then challenges us to explain to him why we think we are justified in excluding that scenario, i.e. to exclude its possible actuality. Given that we steadily stay non-sceptics, we have to choose between two equally uncomfortable options: either we find a hidden contradiction in what the sceptic presents as possible (which has turned out very difficult, if not impossible in many cases) or else we simply declare our psychological inability to believe him and thereby end the discussion before it even got started.

A medium between these extremes, I think, is to take scepticism to be an epidemic: a contagious superstition, which, for fear of infection, we do better to isolate than to confront directly. Such an epidemiological rather than epistemological response requires some redefinition of what it means to meet the sceptical challenge: we do not have to convince those among us who are already infected with the sceptical virus; instead, we have to prevent the sceptical disease from propagating, i.e. to detain the sceptics among us of convincing others. In order to do this, we cannot stay with our own inability to believe the sceptics: we have to justify and to explain to others why we cannot get ourselves into believing them. Our inability to waive our knowledge claims has to be argued for -- in a way that *shows* (displays, not demonstrates) that it is not idiosyncratic, not prejudiced and not just a symptom of our unwillingness to consider their arguments. To meet the sceptical challenge, therefore, I have to win a three-person game: I, the antisceptic, have to convince you, the innocent bystander, that you should not believe the sceptic who is trying to convince you of the epistemic possibility of the scenario he sketches. I have to convince you that the reasons I have for not being a sceptic carry over, if you are not a sceptic already, to your case. Taking scepticism seriously, then, is to take it seriously as a threat. It is not necessarily trying to refute it: it is enough to show that what the sceptic takes to be possible is not possible *for the two of us*.

I want to argue that one of the best known scenarios sceptics and anti-sceptics have produced so far is, *for the sceptic*, relevantly similar to the way Moore's paradox is *for us*: both of us are unable, by the very structure of our respective utterances, to produce conviction. Though they may be true and even believed to be true, the sceptic trying to convince us has to show more: he has to show that we are not epistemically required to disbelieve them to be false. Assuming that we are not deluded ($\neg p$), the sceptic has to show us both that we are able to believe that we are deluded (p) and that we do not disbelieve that we are not deluded ($\neg D\neg p$). If belief in delusion would require disbelief in non-delusion, we would be justified in not wanting to give him his chance. Given that we already believe that we are not deluded, he would demand the epistemically impossible: to believe and disbelieve the same proposition. So the sceptic has to convince us of (2), i.e. that we are not deluded, but at the same time do not disbelieve we are not deluded. Only in this way he can overcome our cognitive resistance. I will argue that his task is hopeless.

It is this commitment to a locally anti-symmetric alternativeness relation that justifies our reluctance to believe, even if it is for the sake of the sceptic's argument, that we do not disbelieve that his counterfactual sceptical scenario is actual. What the sceptic asks us to do, in effect, is to suspend our confidence in our knowledge claims, i.e. to accept the following as true:

(3) I know that p , but I believe (for the sake of the argument) that I do not disbelieve that I do not know that p .

If the second conjunct is true and I have the belief that I am lacking the confidence I actually have in my knowledge claims, then the first conjunct is true only in worlds which are not doxastic alternatives to any of my doxastic alternatives. Thus (3) asks us to epistemically place ourselves in worlds from which there is no road back to the world where we take ourselves to be. The suspension of my confidence is only problematic if I actually endorse the knowledge claims I have confidence in. That is why (3) is a problem for me, being a non-skeptic, but not for someone who is a skeptic already.

If scepticism requires a leap of faith we have good reasons not to take, we treat the skeptic fairly in disbelieving him without proving him wrong.