Common Sense and the Self-Refutation of Skepticism

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I begin then, with my list of truisms, every one of which I know, with certainty, to be true."

— G.E. Moore, "A Defence of Common Sense"

"Russell's view that I do not now for certain that this is a pencil or that you are conscious rests, if I am right, on four assumptions. And what I can't help asking myself is this: Is it, in fact, as certain that all these four assumptions are true, as that I do know that this is a pencil and that you are conscious? I cannot help answering: It seems to me more certain that I do know that this is a pencil and that you are conscious, than that any single one of these four assumptions is true, let alone all four. Nay more: I do not think it is rational to be as certain of any one of these four propositions, as of the proposition that I do know that this is a pencil."

— G.E. Moore, "Four Forms of Skepticism"

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1. Introduction

David Hume, the most famous of all skeptical philosophers, is almost equally famous for his admission that neither he nor anyone else could integrate skepticism into daily life: "[S]ince reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose. I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hours' amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold and strained and ridiculous that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther. Here then I find myself absolutely and necessarily determined to live and talk and act like other people in the common affairs of life."[1] While Hume thought that this just further demonstrated the weakness of human reason, I think that we can use this admission to build a general refutation of skepticism.

Accordingly, this paper will first explain my general strategy against skepticism; second, answer typical objections to my view; and third, briefly comment on the central error of skepticism.

2. The General Strategy

All rational arguments — in philosophy as well as other fields — reason from premises to conclusions. If the premises are true, then so are the conclusions; if the conclusions are false, then at least one of the premises must be false. This is just elementary logic, but pay close attention to this structure: Arguments link premises and conclusions. Suppose then that something produces an argument such that the conclusions follow from the premises. Must we, on pain of irrationality, accept the conclusion? Not at all; it always remains open to us to deny the premises. Of course, we could admit the premises and accept the conclusion. But reason in general doesn't require it. To reach true conclusions we need more than valid arguments; we also need to figure out whether to admit the premises and hence the conclusion, or deny the conclusion and hence the premises.

How should we rationally make this choice? Oftentimes, we can use other arguments to attack the same problem from a different angle. But in philosophical arguments, we frequently find that the whole of our knowledge, or very large pieces of it, are in question. And in any case, it couldn't generally be the case that we resolve the conflict between premises and conclusions by bringing in other arguments, since that would lead to an infinite regress. The problem of plausible premises coupled with implausible conclusions seems intractable. However, in my previous papers[2] I pointed to our faculty of judgment, which is variously called intellect, reason, and intuition.

I argued that by honestly and thoughtfully applying our intellect to certain propositions, we could immediately see their truth -- even if (contra Hume) the opposite is conceivable and implies no self- contradiction. Thus, I said that we come to learn the law of cause- and-effect not by experience alone (which, as Hume showed, would be circular), nor by scrutinizing the definitions of the terms (which would not reveal the truth or falsity of the law), but by carefully focusing our intellects on the law and thinking about it until its truth becomes evident. We

establish the truth of many propositions this way: logical laws and mathematics, for example. I propose to handle the conflict between premises and conclusions in precisely the same way. Suppose that a set of premises implies a conclusion. The premises seem evident; but the conclusion doesn't. Maybe the conclusion is false, and we were too quick to accept the premises; but maybe the premises are true, and prejudice alone prevents us from accepting the conclusion. As before, apply your faculty of judgment, your intellect, to the problem. Try to think about the two sets of propositions as honestly and carefully as you can, until you figure out which is more likely (or perhaps certain) to be true.[3]

To give an example from my own field, the French economist Frederic Bastiat noted that many people thought that labor-saving machinery was bad because it destroyed jobs. He suggested that it would therefore be a wise policy to destroy all machinery, and thereby create even more jobs. Bastiat presents a premise that many people believe, coupled with an implication of it that no one believes. But how should we choose rationally? Consider the premise and the conclusion and decide whether it makes more sense for the conclusion to be true or the premise to be false. It turns out that the conclusion is so absurd that both it and the premise must be wrong. How does this relate to skepticism? Every valid skeptical argument, like all valid arguments, gives us two choices: either reject the premises or accept the conclusion. For example, Hume shows that the distinction between matters of fact and relations of ideas implies skepticism about induction. This doesn't prove that induction isn't valid. It just shows that either we must reject the distinction or become skeptics about induction. So too with Descartes: either we must reject his theory of perception or become skeptics about the external world. At this point, I return to the observation that skeptical arguments never "inspire conviction." Humean philosophers and scientists don't abandon inductive arguments. Hume himself admitted that he couldn't believe his conclusions for more than a few moments at a time. What does this show? It shows that even radical skeptics seriously doubt their conclusions. And often their doubt is not a mere feeling of unease, but serious intellectual doubt.

Thus, skeptical scientists find themselves unable to believe Hume's critique of induction as they unemotionally make scientific arguments. The doubt is intellectual, spurred by the inability to rationally forego inductive argument. And what about the premises? They would have to be

mightily evident to retain belief even after they yielded such counterintuitive conclusions. Yet they are not at all evident; they are fairly abstract and each can be (and has been) reasonably criticized.

From these two observations I draw this conclusion: Skepticism is irrational because it always involves rejecting an obvious conclusion in favor of a highly dubious premise. That inductive arguments are valid is quite evident; the distinction between matters of fact and relations of ideas isn't. The existence of the external world is evident; the representationalist theory of perception isn't. Of course, taken by themselves, it would take some effort to refute the latter two views. But when they imply manifestly false propositions, we should immediately conclude that the premises must be false. Indeed, this is one of the best tests of dubious premises: see whether they imply anything absurd. If they do, then the premises should be rejected. To do otherwise is to select a less evident over a more evident conclusion. Another fact to consider is that all philosophical premises are difficult and abstract. They may seem obvious after a while, but nevertheless, they remain difficult and abstract. It would be easy to err in this area: for naturally, the likelihood of error grows with the difficulty and abstractness of the subject matter. In contrast, the propositions of common sense are indeed simple and easy. Almost everyone understands them -- not just brilliant philosophers. Given this contrast - between the simplicity of common sense and the difficulty of philosophy - where are we more likely to mistake a falsehood for the truth?

Let me state the argument another way. Common sense tells us, among other things, that induction is valid and that there is an external world. These propositions are simple and evident. Now in order to argue against them, one would naturally have to begin with premises that are even more evident; for it would be impossible to refute a more evident principle with a less evident one. After all, if a less evident principle conflicts with a more evident one, then it is the less evident one that must go. And yet, there are no premises more evident than the ones of common sense — especially not in philosophy, where the arguments are difficult and abstract. If a philosophical theory implies skepticism, we should take it as a reductio ad absurdum, not a proof of skepticism.

3. Objections Answered

1. "You haven't argued for the truth of common sense; you've just asserted it."

The problem with this objection is that it assumes that either one produces an argument or makes an unjustified assertion. But these are not the only possibilities. As I explained, it may be possible to justify a claim not by arguing for it (which would lead to an infinite regress), but rather by carefully and honestly applying one's intellect to it until its truth becomes immediately evident. As an example, consider mathematics. You will notice that while mathematicians produce proofs, they don't produce separate and additional proofs for each step of the proof. Instead, they think about each step carefully and honestly and decide whether it is valid; and if it is, they make that step. And if someone else couldn't see it, the mathematician wouldn't conclude that math was unjustified; he would conclude that the person in question wasn't very good at math. Using the intellect to evaluate common sense is actually easier, since even Hume and other skeptics demonstrate that they can't persistently deny common sense, whereas there really are some people who don't understand any mathematics.

2. "How do you handle conflicts between common sense propositions?"

The answer is: by the same method as before. If there are two conflicting claims of common sense, then we must once again apply our intellect to the two claims, think about them as carefully and honestly as we can, and then judge which is more likely (or certain) to be true. For example, common sense tells us both that the senses are valid and that the sun revolves around the earth. So when scientists observed that the earth revolves around the sun, philosophers should have noted that a weaker common sense view (Ptolemaic cosmology) had been refuted by a stronger common sense view (the validity of the senses). Common sense wasn't refuted at all. Rather, a more evident principle of common sense was used to discredit a less evident one. Similarly, when critical thinkers want to refute prejudices, they usually show that popular beliefs have been refuted by careful observation — which is the common sense way to double-check our views.

3. "Your view is actually a form of pragmatism: it tells us to just accept 'common sense' without justifying it."

This complaint misunderstands me: I am not saying that because skepticism isn't "practical" or "useful" that it isn't true. You can't believe whatever you feel like; you always have to apply your intellect as honestly and carefully as you can if you want to be right. We know that skepticism is always wrong because when we compare it to common sense views and think carefully and honestly, we can see that common sense is always more likely (or certain).

And the fact that skeptics themselves habitually ignore their own conclusions serves to bolster the claim that it is always more likely that our initial premises are wrong than that skepticism is true. Since skeptics can't persistently hold their thesis without implicitly assuming its negation, we have a good reason to think that they should re-examine their premises and see if they are as evident as they seem to think.[4]

4. "Your 'foundationalist' view actually helps skepticism, since it is always conceivable that you're wrong and the world is different than you think."

This is another version of the error I attacked in my first paper: the view that reason can do nothing except uncover the presence or absence of contradictions. If so, then one can always object to any view that "Were it demonstratively false, it would imply a contradiction, and could never be distinctly conceived by the mind."[5] But I don't concede this. Suppose that reason does something other than merely pick out contradictions; it can sometimes figure out that something is true just by carefully thinking about it. In that case, one might say: Of course, alternatives are "conceivable" but they are nevertheless impossible.

It is conceivable that my reason is radically deficient, but my very ability to grasp that claim shows the opposite. (I.e., only if my reason worked could I know that it was conceivable for

my reason to be radically deficient). Indeed, I could use my own anti-skeptical strategy to refute this line of reasoning. The premise is that it is always possible for me to be mistaken; the conclusion is that the common sense correspondence theory of "absolute" truth is untenable. Well, which is more evident after careful and honest reflection: that it is always possible for me to be mistaken, or that the common sense view of truth is wrong? Surely the common sense view of truth is more evident; indeed, it is arguably the strongest of all common sense principles. Therefore, sometimes it is impossible for me to be mistaken. If this seems arrogant, consider an elementary principle of mathematics like "1+1=2." While it is conceivable for me to err, it is surely impossible that I could be wrong about "1+1=2." So we have one example where error is conceivable yet impossible. And if one — why not others? And which others, if not the principles of common sense?

4. Conclusion

I assume that many philosophers would find it hard to take this blanket refutation of classic epistemological problems seriously. But it follows from three simple premises:

1. Presented with a valid argument, we must either accept the premises and hence the conclusions, or else reject the conclusions and therefore the premises.
2. It is irrational to reject a more evident view in favor of a less evident one.
3. The propositions of common sense are more evident than any of the premises that imply skepticism (or, indeed, any abstract philosophical premises).

Premises #1 and #2 are completely evident. And while skeptics will surely say that they deny premise #3, their practical inability to actually be skeptics consistently should make us doubt this. A proposition would have to be self-evident to endlessly reassert itself in the minds of even committed skeptics — especially a brilliant skeptic like David Hume. One would think that the very inability of skeptics to hold their views consistently should have raised doubts in their minds.

After all, if they can't even make sense of the world without ignoring all of their philosophical views, then they have a good reason to doubt those views. In general, I can't understand why

otherwise reasonable people don't consider the simple possibility that their starting premises were wrong. Such mistakes happen all the time; and our best intellectual defense is to carefully check the conclusions that they yield to make sure that they don't contradict anything we know for certain -- most notably, the claims of common sense.

Notes

1. Quoted in Frederick Copleston, A History of Philosophy (New York: Doubleday, 1959), vol.5, pp.315-316.

2: Bryan Caplan, "An Enquiry Concerning Hume's Misunderstanding" and idem, "Underived Knowledge: An Answer to Skepticism about Induction and the External World."

3: Admittedly, this advice is unsatisfying, since it offers no general rule for correct thinking. But I see no alternative; for suppose that someone suggested a rule. We would then have to think about whether or not the rule were correct; and to avoid an infinite regress, we would have to admit that some rules could be judged directly and immediately without recourse to further rules. So why not just admit that it is possible to apply one's intellect directly and immediately to individual propositions, which is surely an easier task than judging vast classes of such propositions?

4: While I am on the subject, let me sharply distinguish my view from that of Nelson Goodman in his "The New Riddle of Induction." Says Goodman, "A rule is amended if it yields an inference we are unwilling to accept; an inference is rejected if it violates a rule we are unwilling to amend." (p.64) I, in contrast, say that we should decide on the basis of what it more likely to be true.

The fact that I accept something isn't an argument for its truth; people "accept" all sorts of false beliefs. But if we think about something and see that it is true, we have a justification for believing it. Goodman's error becomes particularly evident when one realizes that different people accept different things, but all of them can't be right (as they could be by Goodman's

criterion).

5: David Hume, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, pp.15-16.

Appendix (Not to be graded)

If it is always more rational to adhere to common sense than any theory in conflict with common sense, what is left for philosophy to do? I can think of at least three functions. First, philosophy can develop positive theories about the world, knowledge, the mind, and so on, since common sense rarely gives specific answers to such questions. Common sense, for example, tells us that we know things; but I doubt that common sense recommends rationalism over empiricism or vice versa. The only limitation my view adds is that all positive philosophical theories must be consistent with common sense. Second, philosophy can point out and resolve inconsistencies — real and apparent — in common sense. A good example of real conflict was that between the validity of the senses and Ptolemaic cosmology — which I discussed above. To take an example of an apparent inconsistency, it is hard to reconcile our common sense views that humans have free will, that inanimate matter doesn't, and that humans are composed of inanimate matter. At this point, a philosopher might point out that the views aren't necessarily inconsistent: an emergence theory of free will can solve the problem. Third, philosophy can actively search out the specific errors made by philosophical theories in conflict with common sense.

Instead of trying to "refute" Hume or Descartes, for example, philosophers would try to figure out where they went wrong so that we can avoid similar errors in the future. Their task would be easier than it is today, because they would know before the fact that the arguments were fallacious.