

## Book Review

Dylan Dodd and Elia Zardina, eds. – *Skepticism & Perceptual Justification*, Oxford University Press, 2014, Hardback, vii + 363 pp., ISBN-13: 978-0-19-965834-3

If I gave this book the justice it deserves, this review would never be completed. Dodd and Zardini have brought together a fine collection of essays, each of which reward careful study. After Dodd and Zardini's introductory essay, there are fifteen essays coming in at over three-hundred pages built around questions about perceptual justification. Ernest Sosa provides an excellent opening essay on Descartes's epistemology and its relation to Sosa's own virtue epistemology. Sosa argues that Descartes's epistemology aims for reflective knowledge of the puzzles that arise from animal knowledge. Descartes's goal is best understood as achieving a secure second-order perspective on the first-order animal knowledge. Descartes is not attempting to rebut a radical skepticism about natural, pre-reflective beliefs. The goal is to find a perspective at which we can reflectively endorse these beliefs from a stable and secure perspective.

After Sosa's inaugural essay, Dodd and Zardini's volume divides nicely into three sections. The first section "The Immediacy of the Senses" discusses dogmatism, the view that perception can justify belief independently of any warranted beliefs about the conditions of perception. This section features essays by Elia Zardini, Brian Weatherson, Jonathan Vogel, José L. Zalabardo, Alan Millar, Susanna Siegel and Nicholas Silins. The second section "The Dependency of the Senses" focuses on conservatism, the denial of dogmatism. Conservatives claim that perception may justify belief only if there is warrant for beliefs about the conditions of perception. This section features Crispin Wright's updated conservative view with his second "On Epistemic Entitlement" essay (for the original essay see [Wright \(2004\)](#)). Several other papers in this section by Aidan McGlynn, Duncan Pritchard, and Annalisa Coliva discuss the plausibility of a conservative view. The last section of essays, "The Evidence of the Senses," discusses the relatively novel idea that the evidence from the senses differ in the normal case and the skeptical case. This section includes essays by Alex Byrne, Roger White, Martin Smith, and Dylan Dodd. These fifteen essays easily form a rewarding semester long study on perceptual justification. The volume provides an excellent sample of the richness of contemporary epistemology including topics in formal epistemology, cognitive neuroscience, traditional epistemology, and some history of epistemology. In the following I comment on three of the essays that I found particularly interesting.

Susanna Siegel and Nicholas Silins begin their fascinating contribution "Consciousness, Attention, and Justification" (pp. 149–169) with the following question:

Compare a subject who enjoys conscious visual experience of a ball, and a hypothetical blindsighted subject who does not have a conscious visual experience of a ball, but who nevertheless registers the presence of a ball in unconscious perceptual processing. Across a range of cases, both subjects reliably form accurate judgements about whether a ball is present. Does the sighted subject have more reason to believe a ball is there? (p. 149)

Seigel and Silins formulate the following theses:

**Attention Needed:** One has reason from an experience to believe that  $x$  is  $F$  only if attends to  $x$  to more than a low degree.

**Attention Optional:** One sometimes has reason from an experience to believe that  $x$  is  $F$  even if one either does not attend to  $x$  at all, or attends to  $x$  only to a low degree. (p. 153)

They then articulate and defend the Attention Optional view. The view assumes that there is conscious experience without attention. Consider Simons and Chabris's (1999) experiment asking participants to count the number of passes of a basketball while a person in a gorilla suit walks in the middle of the players. This case supports the idea that the participants really did see the person in the gorilla suit but because their attention was elsewhere it didn't register. The Attention Optional view suggests that the participants have reason from that experience to believe that a gorilla is present.

A positive answer is suggested by two main sources. First, the phenomenon of inferential blindness. Often we fail to realize incompatible commitments we've made. We have justified beliefs about each of the commitments and justified beliefs about their incompatibility, but we fail to put these sources of beliefs together. In this case you have reason to believe that you can't fulfill these commitments even though you don't realize that you can't fulfill these commitments. Seigel and Silins suggest that the attentional optional view is analogous to this view. A relevant difference, though, is that the unnoticed features of experience are *not* beliefs. Beliefs are available for use in reasoning. Unnoticed features of experience aren't available for such reasoning.

A second line of support comes from change blindness. Consider the case Seigel and Silins offer: your friend Moe has a silly moustache. After years of ribbing, he shaves it off. You see him the next day but don't note a change even though it's plausible that you do experience a difference in Moe. When you do realize that Moe shaved, it's natural to have a Homer Simpson experience—D'oh! the difference was staring me in the face. Seigel and Silins comment: "we take it you kick yourself because you had reason from your experience to believe that Moe has no moustache, even though you failed to take

advantage of the resource you had in forming a belief that his moustache is gone.” (p 156). But, contrary to this suggestion, it’s equally plausible that you kick yourself because you didn’t acquire a reason that was so easily acquired.

Seigel and Silins discuss several pressing objections to the Attention Optional view but the one that is most pressing centers on what they term

**Usability:** An experience E gives you a reason to believe that a is F only if you can form a well-founded belief that a is F on the basis of E. (p. 158)

They consider a defense of Usability and reject it (p. 161). But they successfully identify Usability as a central challenge to the attentional optional view. Grant Usability, then in the case of unattended features of experience one can’t form a well-founded belief on the basis of that very experience. Why think Usability is true? Roughly, which contents experience have are constrained by intentional explanations of behavior. These are common sense explanations of behavior in terms of intention and desire. If we attribute a certain content as featuring in your experience, then it is the kind of thing that one can use as a premise in reasoning. Now, granted it’s possible that there are contents of experience that go unnoticed, but when we think about what one actually has a reason to believe from experience, it is the kinds of things that one can use as premises for reasoning. But those are precisely the items available for demonstration in experience. That is, it is those items for which one can form a demonstrative judgement ‘this is thus’. If one can’t form such judgments then the experience isn’t relevant for justification. The issues here are complex and worth thinking more carefully about, but, as should be clear, Seigel and Silins’s essay provides a valuable source of interesting arguments.

Duncan Pritchard’s essay “Entitlement and the Groundlessness of Our Believing” (pp. 190–212) explores Wittgenstein’s suggestive remarks that the rationality of our beliefs depends on fundamental groundless claims. Pritchard develops the idea that radical skepticism is incoherent because reasons for belief are essentially local (p. 211). Pritchard introduces the skeptical problem with two closure principles. The first principle says that knowledge can be extended by competent deduction. The second principle says that competent deduction from rationally supported knowledge transfers rational support. By the second principle, if one has rationally supported knowledge that p and competently deduces q from p, then q itself is rationally supported. The second principle is stronger than the first because the first merely states that knowledge transfers through competent deduction, while the second specifies that rational support transfers through competent deduction.

The skeptical problem Pritchard focus on concerns heavyweight deductions. Pritchard

uses Dretske's zebra case to make this point (pp. 191-2). Zula looks in a pen and sees a striped equine animal. Zula knows that it is a zebra in the pen on the basis of seeing the equine animal. Zula competently deduces that the animal is not a cleverly disguised mule. It's natural to think that Zula thereby knows that the animal in the pen is not a cleverly disguised mule. But how does she know this? It's not as if she has any special evidence; she is just a normal visitor to the zoo. The second closure principle, though, implies that there is substantive rational support for her belief that this animal is not a cleverly disguised mule.

One strategy for responding to this kind of skeptical problem is Wright's entitlement strategy. On this view, we are entitled to heavyweight implications of ordinary claims, but these heavyweight propositions lack substantive rational support. Pritchard presses two problems with the entitlement strategy: it's not doxastically realistic and it implies the falsity of the second form of closure. In response to these problems, Pritchard looks for another view that shares similarities with Wright's original entitlement strategy and Wittgenstein's remarks in [Wittgenstein \(1969\)](#).

Pritchard's view is this. There is no local skeptical problem in Zula's case. Contrary to how the case has been explained, Zula's belief that the animal in the pen is not a cleverly disguised mule does have substantive rational support. Zula has many background reasons for thinking this, e.g., the implausibility of deception, the way zoos operate, the availability of zebras, etc (p. 200). The skeptical problem, Pritchard notes, isn't a local one but a global one. The heavyweight proposition isn't that this animal isn't a zebra but rather that Zula is a brain-in-a-vat. At this point, Pritchard turns to Wittgenstein's development of the idea that "all rational evaluation is *necessarily* local" (205). If this view is correct, then, Pritchard maintains, both closure principles are true. The issues here are fascinating and worth more reflection. One issue for Pritchard's view is why a radical skepticism is intelligible and also why we believe the heavyweight implications of ordinary claims. I lack space to develop these issues here, but Pritchard's view is reminiscent of Michael Williams's epistemological relativism (see [Williams \(1991\)](#)).

Roger White in his essay "What is my evidence that here is a hand?" (pp. 298-321) wrestles with the question of how paradoxical skepticism actually is. One contemporary view, defended by Williamson and McDowell, has it that skepticism is puzzling but not deeply so. Skeptical arguments assume a false epistemological thesis that one can reasonably reject and thus one can come to see through the allure of skepticism. What is that false epistemological thesis? It is that perceptual experience offers you the same evidence that 'here is the hand' in the good case and the bad case. This view, **Evidence Externalism**, alleges that skeptical arguments falsely assume that a perfect hallucination

of hands offers you the same evidence that you have when you actually see hands. If, instead, you have different evidence in the good case and the bad case then there is room to explain how veridical experience offers you better evidence for hands than non-veridical experience.

White argues that the idea that perceptual experience offers you the same evidence in both the good case and bad case is not so easily rejected. This view, **Cartesianism**, explains many ordinary judgments we make about justification. It explains why it's puzzling to dismiss doubts about the reliability of perceptual experience by relying entirely on perceptual experience (see pp. 302-304). It explains why it's puzzling to think that one's phenomenal twin is less justified than you are in believing that 'here is a hand'. There are advocates of Evidence Externalism that have learned to live with such perplexities. They conceive of justification or entitlement as akin to a legal right. Suppose you are building a new room on your home. You look up the number for the county building permit office. Unfortunately, you misdial the number and end up with a professional comedian, who on a lark dresses up as the county official, gets official looking paperwork, and then gives you fake approval. Clearly, you do not have the right to build. So, Evidence Externalists hold: in a skeptical scenario one doesn't have the right to believe that 'here is a hand.'

Along with White, I think this kind of view is deeply puzzling. In the building permit case, you had every right to believe that you had obtained a permit, even though you actually didn't obtain a permit. One of the novel aspects of White's argument is to press the charge against advocates of Evidence Externalism that it doesn't actually solve the skeptical problem. White claims, "Evidence Externalism has no significant role to play in blocking the skeptical argument" (p. 318). White suggests that the following principle is true:

**Independent Justification:** If independently of my experience it is not unlikely that it will appear to me that P even if not-P, then I cannot gain justification to believe that P from an experience with the content that P (even if the experience is in all other respects like a Good Case of veridical perceptual experience). (p. 318)

If this is true, then the experience offers a reason to believe that one is not in a skeptical situation only if one has antecedent reason to believe that skeptical scenarios are unlikely. But Evidence Externalism is often conjoined with a form of anti-rationalism to the effect that, apart from experience, one has no basis for determining that skeptical scenarios are unlikely. The result is that even if Evidence Externalism is true, it doesn't help solve the skeptical problem. The upshot is that skepticism is deeply paradoxical.

These three essays are a small sample of the superb contributions in this collection. Dodd and Zardini are to be thanked for putting together this excellent volume.

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## References

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