

The Mystery of Skepticism

New Explorations

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BRILL

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Two Strategies for Explaining Away Skepticism

Kevin McCain and Ted Poston

1 Introduction¹

Why not skepticism? After all, some philosophers suggest that we simply cannot adequately respond to skepticism, or at the very least that the prospects for doing so are particularly dismal.² In light of this, perhaps we should simply accept skepticism as a way of life.³ So, again, why not skepticism? The short answer is that skepticism fails as an explanatory hypothesis.

The core skeptical thought is that our cognitive position with respect to many ordinary beliefs is too weak to secure justification and knowledge. The skeptic reasons that our cognitive position is constituted by appearances and that we lack sufficient evidence, reason, or justification for taking those appearances to be accurate representations of the world. One common response to skepticism is G.E. Moore's response. According to the Moorean response, start with an ordinary belief, claim it is knowledge, and then deduce the falsity of any hypothesis incompatible with the truth of the mundane belief. Explanationist responses to skepticism differ from the now popular Moorean responses.⁴ What is often unnoticed about these explanationist responses is that they come in at least two varieties. Our goal in this paper is to clearly lay out these responses and how they work as well as their strengths and the challenges they face. Although our primary goal is to consider these responses in their own right, as is often helpful for truly appreciating a particular theory, we will consider how each compares with the Moorean response.

1 Thanks to audiences at Auburn University and the 2016 Alabama Philosophical Society meeting for helpful comments on earlier drafts.

2 See Lehrer (1971), Stroud (1984), and Fumerton (1995).

3 Reed (Chapter 5 of this volume)

4 There are hints of the explanationist response to skepticism as early as Locke (1690/1975). More recent versions of this response have been proposed by Russell (1912), Jackson (1977), Cornman (1980), Bonjour (1985), (1999), Goldman (1988), Lycan (1988), Moser (1989), Vogel (1990), (2005), and McCain (2014a), (2016). See Moore (1939), Pryor (2000), (2004), Pritchard (2002), and Willenken (2011) for discussion and defense of the Moorean response to skepticism.

2 Explanationism – A Brief Primer

Before digging into the specifics of the two kinds of explanationist responses to skepticism, the relation between these responses and explanationism needs to be made clear. Some may mistakenly assume that accepting an explanationist response to skepticism commits one to accepting strong forms of explanationism. Of course, explanationist responses to skepticism fit particularly well within a broader explanationist epistemology, however, an explanationist response to skepticism does not imply accepting more than a weak form of explanationism.

William Lycan (2002: 417) offers a helpful taxonomy of explanationist views:

Weak Explanationism:

explanatory inferences (inferences to the best explanation) from a given set of premises can epistemically justify a conclusion.

Sturdy Explanationism:

Weak Explanationism + explanatory inferences can justify conclusions without being derived from some other more basic form of ampliative inference.

Ferocious Explanationism:

Sturdy Explanationism + explanatory inference is the only basic form of ampliative inference.

Holocaust Explanationism:

Ferocious Explanationism + all inferences and reasoning, including deductive, is derived from explanatory inference.

There is considerable controversy concerning the truth of the various kinds of explanationism. For present purposes it will not be necessary to go into the details of this debate.⁵ Instead, all that is needed at this point is recognition that explanationist responses to skepticism, while consistent with all four kinds of explanationism, are only committed to the truth of *Weak Explanationism*. All that is required for either of the primary kinds of explanationist response that we will consider is that explanatory inferences can provide justification for their conclusions. So, even if one finds the other, stronger forms of explanationism implausible, she should not simply dismiss the explanationist response on those grounds.⁶

5 For a sampling of the debate the reader is encouraged to look at Harman (1965), (1986), Lehrer (1974), van Fraassen (1980), (1989), Fumerton (1980), (1992), (1995), Lycan (1988), (2002), Roche & Sober (2013), McCain (2014a), McCain & Poston (2014), and Poston (2014).

6 It is worth pointing out that there is some reason to think that one cannot at the same time take skepticism seriously and deny explanationism (at least of the weak variety). According to James Beebe (2017), skepticism presupposes explanationism.

3 Getting Clear on the Skeptic's Argument

With the relationship between explanationist responses to skepticism and explanationism in hand it is time to turn to examining skepticism. To sharpen the skeptical puzzle let us put on the table a particular skeptical argument, one that starts with a popular skeptical hypothesis: “the Boltzmann Brain” hypothesis:

Given what we know about the nature of the universe, it is a priori quite unlikely that we would have a state of low entropy like this, a state in which there are galaxies, stars, planets, persons, animals, and so on. A much more likely scenario is that a chance fluctuation of matter results in an isolated state of low entropy in which there is an isolated brain floating in space. This brain realizes conscious states of experiences like ours with apparent memories of a long past. The conscious subject of this Boltzmann brain—Brainy—is in a state phenomenologically indistinguishable from a normal embodied state of a subject like us. Right now it appears to Brainy that she is reading a philosophy book and thinking about the implications of explanationism and skepticism.

The Boltzmann Brain can be used to generate a skeptical argument (BRAIN):

- (1) Necessarily, if S knows that (e.g.) S has hands, then S knows that S is not a handless Boltzmann brain.
 - (2) S does not know that S is not a handless Boltzmann brain.
- So,
- (3) S does not know that (e.g.,) S has hands.⁷

Of course, there are numerous other hypotheses that can be used to construct analogous skeptical arguments. However, the points we make about BRAIN are equally applicable to these other skeptical arguments.

4 Two Explanationist Responses to Skepticism

Although the two explanationist responses to skepticism that we will discuss are importantly different, they are also similar in various ways. It is worth

⁷ There are important questions about how to best understand arguments for skepticism. For example, there is an ongoing debate (see Cohen (1998), Brueckner (1994), Pritchard (2005), and McCain (2013)) concerning the relationship between skeptical arguments that employ closure principles (such as BRAIN) and those that construe skepticism as an underdetermination problem. We can set aside this question and similar questions for our present purposes because the answers to them will not affect our arguments.

noting two of these similarities before describing the responses and their differences in detail. First, an obvious similarity—both are committed to the truth of explanationism (at least of the weak variety). Second, both explanationist responses deny premise (2) of BRAIN on explanatory grounds. Very roughly, both responses involve arguing that we do know that we are not handless Boltzmann brains because a rival hypothesis best explains our experiences—our ordinary real world hypothesis (RWH).⁸

The most helpful way to get a handle on the two explanationist responses to skepticism is to situate them in broader approaches to epistemology. On the one hand, we have what we might term a “first philosophy” approach to epistemology, which begins with skepticism and uses the response to it as the basis for a full theory of knowledge. On the other hand, we have a “second philosophy” approach, which does not consider far-reaching skepticism to be a primary concern. Let us take a look at both of these explanationist responses.

4.1 *Explanationism & First Philosophy*

First Philosophy Explanationism (Ex-1st) is inspired by the epistemological project of Descartes. This variety of explanationism places a strong emphasis on responding to the threat of skepticism. Accordingly, Ex-1st involves dealing with the challenge of skepticism, and then, using the insights gained by meeting this challenge to develop a full epistemology. So, skepticism, and responding to it, is a central (if not *the* central) issue around which Ex-1st develops as a theory. Importantly, Ex-1st does not guarantee an anti-skeptical end result. It is compatible with this way of responding to skepticism that at the end of the day skepticism is correct. After all, it could turn out on this picture that skepticism of one variety or another is the best explanatory hypothesis on offer. It could turn out this way, but supporters of this explanationist response argue that things do not in fact turn out this way.

Ex-1st in large part revolves around meeting the skeptic’s challenge. But, it is more than this. The Ex-1st explanationist not only attempts to meet the skeptical challenge by responding to the skeptic’s argument (as much as possible) and developing a full epistemological theory from the results, she attempts to do this by meeting the skeptic’s challenge head on. Ex-1st begins from a neutral starting point—this is why those making this sort of response to skepticism acknowledge that skepticism is not guaranteed to be defeated; there is a lot of work required to overcome the challenge of skepticism. Explanationists who offer this sort of response to skepticism are careful to only make use of evidence and explanatory virtues that do not privilege our RWH over skeptical

⁸ We borrow the term “real world hypothesis” from Vogel (1990).

rivals from the outset.⁹ Ex-1st insists on responding to the skeptic in a way that does not beg the question against the skeptic by taking for granted anything that cannot also be true given various skeptical hypotheses. For instance, an Ex-1st explanationist will not assume that we have sense organs when arguing against the skeptic because such an assumption conflicts with the Boltzmann Brain hypothesis. Instead, this explanationist response will begin with data that is present whether or not we are Boltzmann brains—namely, our own non-factive mental states. Paul Moser (1990: 131–132) offers a nice brief encapsulation of the Ex-1st response to skepticism:

If (a) I seem to see a white piece of paper, (b) the contents of this perceptual experience are best explained for me by the physical object proposition that there is a white piece of paper here, and (c) nothing in my overall perceptual and sensory experience indicates that there is not a white piece of paper here or that the explanatory relation of (b) does not hold, then the proposition that there is a white piece of paper here is empirically epistemically justifiable for me.

Like all explanationist responses to skepticism Ex-1st involves a commitment to the truth of weak explanationism. Ex-1st also seeks to deny premise (2) of BRAIN on explanatory grounds. Typically, supporters of this sort of response to skepticism will argue that the RWH is superior to the Boltzmann Brain hypothesis on the grounds that the former has more explanatory power, is simpler, and so on than the latter. One thing that those opting for an Ex-1st explanationist response to skepticism might point out is that whereas the RWH can make accurate predictions about how our sensory experiences will be, the Boltzmann Brain hypothesis can only accommodate the data about our sensory experiences after the fact.¹⁰ Vogel, for example, argues that aspects of our sensory visual experience of apparent three-dimensional objects follow from the geometry of such objects together with a common-sense hypothesis about the way vision works. The Boltzmann Brain hypothesis has to add these features of sensory experience into the content of the hypothesis. Another thing would be to argue that necessary truths can play an explanatory role in RWH explanations that can only be mimicked by contingent regularities in Boltzmann Brain explanations. As a result of this difference, one can argue

9 For contemporary examples of this sort of explanationist response to skepticism see Bonjour (1985), (1999), Bonjour and Sosa (2003), Moser (1989), (1990), Vogel (1990), (2005), and McCain (2014a), (2016).

10 See McCain (2012) for more on this point.

that the RWH is simpler than the Boltzmann Brain hypothesis in a very important sense.¹¹

There are other explanatory virtues that can be appealed to in making an Ex-1st response to skepticism besides those mentioned above. Rather than list the myriad ways in which one can make an Ex-1st explanationist response to skepticism we will simply note one way that is not an option. Ex-1st does not countenance appeals to the explanatory virtue of conservatism (the idea that fit with background information or leading to fewer revisions to one's overall set of beliefs is a good-making feature of an explanation). Appealing to conservatism can make it a fairly straightforward matter to respond to the skeptic's argument. Nonetheless, conservatism gives us a reason to prefer the RWH to the Boltzmann Brain hypothesis only if we already have beliefs that presuppose the existence of mind-independent external world objects of the sort that we typically take ourselves to interact with on a regular basis. In other words, the virtue of conservatism will not favor either hypothesis given a completely neutral standpoint in the skeptical debate. It is from just such a standpoint that Ex-1st proposes to engage the skeptic, so conservatism is off the table for this response to skepticism.

4.2 *Explanationism & Second Philosophy*

Second Philosophy Explanationism (Ex-2nd) begins with our natural conception of the world. We are human creatures who live in a physical world. We do have knowledge and much of our knowledge comes by way of the senses. But this natural conception of ourselves is riddled with philosophical puzzles. If we genuinely know that we have hands on the basis of sense perception, then why does it seem wrong to infer from that knowledge alone that we are not in a skeptical scenario?

Aristotle's epistemology provides direction.¹² The goal (telos) of human belief is *scientia* (roughly, a complete and coherent view of knowledge and the causal basis for this knowledge). We begin in a state that may be called pre-understanding in which we have viewpoints that need to be brought to the maturity of science. If *scientia* is achievable, then the puzzles that our

11 For more on this see Vogel (1990) and (2005). Of course, the Ex-2nd explanationist can also make these sorts of arguments against the skeptic.

12 It is worth noting that although there are definitely epistemic naturalist themes in Aristotle's writings, and he does say a number of things that are congenial to explanationism, it is not clear that Aristotle himself should be taken to be a representative of Ex-2nd. However, since our present goal isn't Aristotle scholarship, we will simply make use of the components of his epistemology that help illustrate important points about Ex-2nd.

pre-understanding gives rise to can be resolved into a comprehensive and coherent view of the world. (see Posterior Analytics 1.1)

Aristotle's stress on the importance of coherence and the distinction between pre-understanding and understanding is a similar motif to what is found in modern epistemic *naturalism*.¹³ Aristotle sees the necessity of having starting points that are, in some respect, epistemic successes. This is due to his reflection on the *Meno* paradox. Plato argues that no learning is possible unless one already has knowledge. Aristotle refines the puzzle by arguing that there are lower epistemic successes besides *episteme*. Contemporary epistemic naturalists likewise see that a view from nowhere is impossible. We must begin with a privileged, but defeasible, viewpoint. As W.V.O. Quine (1960: 3) puts the point:

The philosopher and the scientist are in the same boat. If we improve our understanding of ordinary talk of physical things, it will not be by reducing that talk to a more familiar idiom; there is none. It will be by clarifying the connections, causal or otherwise, between our ordinary talk of physical things and various further matters which in turn we grasp with the help of ordinary talk of physical things.

Let us clear up a confusion about the relationship between epistemological naturalism and metaphysical naturalism. This latter form of naturalism is roughly the view that there are no non-physical aspects to reality. In epistemology, naturalism is aligned with the view that epistemology is an aspect of empirical psychology. Epistemic naturalism is often aligned with the idea that epistemology should use the methods of natural science and thus inference to the best explanation has a key role to play. In our view, the idea that epistemology should use inference to the best explanation is entirely separable from the view that epistemology is a dimension of empirical psychology. Our emphasis on Aristotle makes it clear that while the broadly Quinean view runs these two elements together, they are separable. Poston (2014) provides a broadly Aristotelian conception of epistemology. The aim of epistemology is knowledge and the methods are the explanatory virtues of simplicity, explanatory power, and

¹³ See Neurath (1983), Quine (1960), (1990), Quine and Ullian (1970), Goodman (1965), (1978), Harman (1973), (1980), (1986), Kuhn (1977), Laudan (1984), Lycan (1988), Maddy (2007), and Poston (2012a), (2013a), (2013b), (2014). See also Sosa's (2007), (2009) virtue epistemology. It is worth noting that in some cases these philosophers are concerned primarily with more narrow issues in philosophy of science rather than responding to external world skepticism or developing a full epistemological theory. Despite this fact, they each fall squarely within the epistemological naturalist camp, and they each argue for claims that lend support to Ex-2nd.

conservativeness. Poston's view is like Quine's in the respect of claiming that we can begin epistemology with our ordinary beliefs about the world and look to the methods of science (and others if relevant) to increase the explanatory power of our view. But it is unlike Quine's naturalistic view in that it is not committed to the claim that epistemology is empirical psychology.

How does an Ex-2nd response work? Poston (2014) provides a contemporary account. The key is to figure out how to make sense of a privileged starting point that does not license an objectionable dogmatism.¹⁴ Poston interprets this in terms of defeasible epistemic conservatism. Briefly, the idea is that a person has epistemic justification for her existing beliefs provided they do not conflict with her evidence. Epistemic conservatism provides some key evidence for assessing other beliefs.

In addition to epistemically conservative belief, the explanatory virtues of simplicity and power provide the rest of the Ex-2nd account. All other things being equal, a theory that is simpler than a competing theory has more epistemic merit for believing. All other things being equal, a theory that is more powerful than another also has more epistemic merit. An Ex-2nd view is thus one that holds that a proposition p is epistemically justified for a subject if and only if it is part of a virtuous explanatory system that beats competitor systems in terms of explanatory virtues.

An Ex-2nd view applied to skepticism is straightforward. The conservative aspect of Ex-2nd implies that one may begin assessing the skeptical hypothesis with beliefs that privilege a non-skeptical view. The crucial question then is how virtuous one's initial view is compared with the skeptical view. This involves several sub-questions: (1) How simple is the non-skeptical view and how simple is the skeptical view? (2) How powerful is the non-skeptical view and how powerful is the skeptical view? (3) Which view fits best with our background beliefs?

One challenge that the Ex-2nd response faces that the Ex-1st response does not is dogmatism. Ex-2nd countenances privileging a particular starting point over others. In response, compare Ex-2nd's dogmatism to Moore's dogmatism. Plausibly, Ex-2nd is better because it takes skepticism as a genuine hypothesis that one may come to accept if its virtues are good enough. After all,

14 It is not implausible to think that any approach to epistemology that opts for a particularist approach to the problem of the criterion is committed to giving some starting points a privileged status. At a minimum particularism must allow that some of our beliefs have some presumption in their favor when we start theorizing. See Chisholm (1973), (1982) for discussion of particularism and the idea that some beliefs begin with presumption in their favor. See Poston (2011) and McCain (2014b) for discussion of various explanationist responses to the problem of the criterion.

“One could even end up ... by finding that the smoothest and most adequate overall account of the world does not after all accord existence to ordinary physical things” (Quine 1960: 4). The simplicity and power of a skeptical hypothesis may be enough to overturn its revolutionariness. So, skepticism is not simply ruled out from the start by Ex-2nd as it is given Moorean dogmatism. Skepticism is a live possibility for the Ex-2nd explanationist, nonetheless, the skeptical hypothesis lacks the simplicity and power necessary to overcome its revolutionariness.

5 Prospects for these Responses

Now that we have briefly explored both varieties of explanationist responses to skepticism it is time to compare their strengths as well as the challenges that they face. As we have already noted, both of these responses can be used to respond to skepticism. Plausibly, they can both be successful in showing that premise (2) of BRAIN is false. So, why might we opt for one explanationism over another?

The primary difference between these explanationisms comes down to whether the fact that a belief doesn't conflict with any other beliefs and experiences counts as some evidence for the belief. Ex-2nd allows that it does; Ex-1st doesn't. In a sense, epistemic conservatism is the source of both the strengths and the challenges for these explanationisms. It is a strength of Ex-2nd because accepting epistemic conservatism makes responding to skepticism much easier (though still not a foregone conclusion). The Ex-1st explanationist has a harder time showing that skepticism is false because she does not privilege any of her beliefs as the Ex-2nd explanationist does. Hence, a challenge for Ex-1st lies in being able to show that skepticism really is an inferior hypothesis when one starts from a truly neutral position. So, epistemic conservatism is a strength of the Ex-2nd explanationist response to skepticism, and Ex-1st has a more difficult challenge when it comes to responding to skepticism because it does not embrace epistemic conservatism.

It seems that accepting epistemic conservatism strengthens Ex-2nd when it comes to responding to skepticism, and denying epistemic conservatism makes responding to skepticism more challenging for the Ex-1st explanationist. One might think that this means Ex-2nd is the clear choice to make when it comes to explanationist responses to skepticism. Concluding this may be a bit too hasty though. After all, Ex-2nd faces a challenge that Ex-1st does not—defending epistemic conservatism. Many epistemologists are suspicious of epistemic conservatism; some even think it is a clear instance of “theft over

honest toil.”¹⁵ Hence, epistemic conservatism brings with it a challenge to Ex-2nd, a challenge that Ex-1st does not share.

It is not our purpose to adjudicate between these two explanationist responses here. Rather, our goal is simply to clarify the two distinct explanationist responses to skepticism and point out where their differences lie. That being said, we think that it is plausible that both of these forms of explanationism can overcome the challenges they face. Ex-2nd's challenge can be met because epistemic conservatism can be defended from its detractors.¹⁶ Ex-1st's challenge of responding to skepticism from a truly neutral point can also be overcome.¹⁷ So, what is the upshot? Both forms of explanationism are viable; the choice of explanationist responses depends on one's overall epistemology.

Before concluding it is worth pausing to briefly consider how these various forms of explanationism and their chief internalist rival, Moorean dogmatism, respond to a few key questions. While Moorean dogmatism agrees with Ex-2nd on the existence of a privileged starting point, it remains silent on the key explanationist themes of the importance of explanatory virtues. Additionally, Moorean dogmatism might provide a response to skepticism, but it fails to explain where the skeptic goes wrong, i.e. what's wrong with accepting the skeptical hypothesis. Without such an explanation Moorean dogmatism is apt to strike many as overly dogmatic. Explanationism is a superior response to skepticism. Which explanationist response should be accepted? Our hypothesis is that it depends on whether the project of first philosophy is successful. If it is, then Ex-1st is the better option. If first philosophy is not successful, then neither dogmatism or skepticism follow. Ex-2nd offers a plausible account of human knowledge.

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15 Fumerton (2007). Also, see Foley (1983), Christensen (1994), and Feldman (2003).

16 See McCain (2008), (forthcoming a), (forthcoming b) and Poston (2012b), (2014).

17 Admittedly, there may be additional difficulties for Ex-1st when it comes to other kinds of skepticism—particularly skepticism about memory. However, we will not delve into this issue as it is beyond the scope of external world skepticism which is our concern here. See Poston (2016) for discussion of the challenges that memory skepticism poses for any first philosophy approach to epistemology.

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