Abstract: It is argued that the debate regarding radical scepticism needs to be conducted in the light of a value-theoretic methodological constraint. It is further shown that such a methodological constraint raises some uncomfortable problems for the main anti-sceptical proposals in the literature.

1. Much of the contemporary epistemological literature has focussed on a certain formulation of radical scepticism which goes something like as follows. First, it is claimed that it is intuitive to suppose that we are unable to know the denials of radical sceptical hypotheses, such as that one is presently a brain-in-a-vat (BIV) being undetectably “fed” experiences as if circumstances were normal. The guiding thought here is that since we are, ex hypothesi, unable to tell the difference between normal experiences and envatted experiences, it follows that we are unable to know that we are not BIVs.

The second element of the sceptical reasoning is the claim that knowledge is closed under known entailments, or the “closure” principle for short. There are various ways of refining this principle in order to avoid certain problems that arise for the unrefined formulation, but we can set these complications aside for our purposes here and simply define closure as follows:

Closure for Knowledge
If S knows p, and S knows that p entails q, then S knows q.1

The import of this principle to the sceptical problem becomes clear once one notices that most of us surely know that a great deal of what we believe is incompatible with sceptical hypotheses like the BIV hypothesis. For example, my belief that I have two hands entails that I am not a BIV, since BIVs are by their nature handless. Given closure, however, and the fact that we are, it seems, unable to know that we are not BIVs, it follows that we are also unable to know something so mundane as that we have hands, and much else besides.

We thus get a sceptical argument of the following structure, where “SH” refers to a sceptical hypothesis, like the BIV hypothesis, and “E” refers to an everyday proposition which we typically take ourselves to know and which is logically incompatible with the target sceptical hypothesis:

(1) $S$ is unable to know that not: SH.
(2) $S$ knows that if E then not: SH.
(C) $S$ does not know E.

Given that we can use an argument of this sort to undermine our knowledge of just about any everyday proposition (we would just need to vary the sceptical hypothesis to suit), it follows that a great deal of our knowledge is under threat, and hence radical scepticism quickly ensues.

2.

Given that both premises in this argument are intuitive, and that the closure principle is also intuitive (such that the reasoning employed is sound), it follows that we have an apparent paradox on our hands here – i.e., an unacceptable conclusion which follows from highly intuitive premises. The task in hand is thus to explain where this argument goes awry, and thus why there is in fact no paradox here that needs responding to. The options on this score are very limited.

To begin with, denying (2) is surely a non-starter. Perhaps many people don’t know the entailment at issue in (2), but certainly many do, and amongst those who don’t it would be easy to “create” such knowledge (all one needs to do is simply tell them about the entailment). That just leaves denying either (1) or the closure principle.

On the face of it, denying closure seems the most attractive option of the two, and this was certainly a popular option until relatively recently.² Most

now agree, however, that the price of rejecting closure is too high.³ And that leaves just one option — denying (1).

I take it that it is now accepted by most commentators that this is the right way to respond to the above argument, although there is a wide divergence on the issue of how best to go about this.⁴ For example, contextualists argue that one can have knowledge of the denials of sceptical hypotheses, albeit only in contexts in which the epistemic standards are sufficiently low.⁵ In contrast, others take a “Moorean” approach and maintain that the denials of sceptical hypotheses can be known without relativising this thesis to an epistemic standard.⁶

³ The literature on the status of closure is now so vast that it cannot be usefully summarised here. For a prominent recent discussion of this issue, see the exchange between F. Dretske, “The Case Against Closure” & “Reply to Hawthorne,” in Steup and Sosa (eds.), Contemporary Debates, pp. 13–26, 43–46; and J. Hawthorne, Ibid.

⁴ The main exception is contrastivism, as defended by, for example, J. Schiffer, “Contrastive Knowledge,” in T. Gendler and J. Hawthorne (eds.), Oxford Studies in Epistemology 1, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. According to this proposal, the way to deal with the sceptical problem is to recognise that there is no such thing as knowing a proposition simpliciter, rather, knowledge is always relative to a set of contrasts. I critically discuss contrastivism in Pritchard, “Contrastivisim, Evidence, and Scepticism,” Social Epistemology, 22 (2008), pp. 305–23.


The chief problem faced by both views is to explain what the epistemic basis of this putative knowledge is. After all, given that we are unable to tell the difference between sceptical and corresponding non-sceptical experiences, it is hard to see how we can have any evidence in support of our knowledge that we are not the victims of a sceptical hypothesis. But if this knowledge is not evidentially supported, then what is its epistemic basis?

Various ways of dealing with this problem have been proposed in the recent literature, and we will be examining some of them in more detail in a moment. My primary concern in this paper is not, however, to adjudicate between these different contextualist and neo-Moorean proposals but rather to explore the more general issue of how concerns about the value of knowledge impact upon the debate regarding radical scepticism. In particular, I want to suggest that it is vital to the process of evaluating anti-sceptical theses that we take into account the value of the epistemic standing under threat.7

3.

In order to see the importance of epistemic value for the sceptical debate, one only needs to notice that the aim of scepticism is, presumably, to deprive us of something that is of value to us. If this were not so, then it is hard to see why we should care about sceptical arguments. In particular, if knowledge is not of great value to us, then why should it matter that we don’t have any knowledge as the sceptic claims?

This observation – which we can regard as placing a methodological constraint on how we interpret the target of sceptical arguments – by itself may seem quite anodyne, in that historically at least most commentators have taken it as given that knowledge is distinctively valuable. More recently, however, there has been a great deal of doubt expressed about the value of knowledge.8 Moreover, some have argued that it is only on certain construals that knowledge is valuable – for example, some have claimed that if knowledge is understood along purely externalist lines (as, e.g., the reliabilist proposes), then not only is it not of any great value, it is not even of more value than a corresponding mere true belief.9

There is thus a point to putting a methodological constraint on our dealings with the sceptic such that we should aim to understand the sceptical argument as depriving us of something of great value. With this constraint in play, if it turns out that knowledge is not of great value, then that should make us suspicious that knowledge really is the target of the sceptical argument after all.

In order to see this constraint in action, consider again the contextualist response to scepticism which argues that we can know the denials of sceptical hypotheses, albeit only relative to low epistemic standards. As we noted above, there is a problem facing this proposal of explaining how such knowledge can be possessed relative to any epistemic standard, but let us put that to one side for now and take the proposal at face-value. The import of the value-theoretic methodological constraint on our dealings with scepticism is that we should consider the possibility that such “low-grade” knowledge is not particularly valuable. For if this were to turn out to be the case, then this would give us cause to wonder whether the goal of the sceptical argument is to deprive us of knowledge simpliciter or rather to deprive us of a higher epistemic standing that is of distinctive epistemic value, such as specifically “high-grade” knowledge.

Indeed, once one starts to consider the nature of the low-grade knowledge that one possesses in contexts in which the epistemic standards are very low one can start to see why it might well be plausible to regard such knowledge as not being the target of a sceptical argument. Typically, for example, what characterises contexts with low epistemic standards is the fact that certain error-possibilities – such as sceptical error-possibilities – are simply ignored in these contexts. Given that they are ignored, says the contextualist, knowledge can be possessed, including (since closure holds) knowledge that one is not the victim of a sceptical hypothesis. According to the standard contextualist line, however, once these sceptical hypotheses are made explicit in that context then one needs to rule them out in order to retain one’s knowledge, and in this way the epistemic standards for knowledge are raised. Since one cannot rule-out these error-possibilities, however, knowledge is lost in these high standards contexts.

Given the value-theoretic methodological constraint that we have laid-down, however, we should be immediately suspicious of an anti-sceptical line of this sort. What, after all, is so valuable about the kind of low-grade knowledge that is being rescued from the sceptical challenge by contextualist lights? In particular, one would naturally suppose that the kind of knowledge which the sceptic is concerned to deprive us of is precisely the “highgrade” knowledge which the contextualist effectively concedes cannot be possessed.

Indeed, a standard line regarding the distinctive value of knowledge that is found in the literature is that knowledge is distinctively valuable precisely because knowledge is a cognitive achievement on our part, a cognitive suc-
cess that we can take credit for. Since low-grade knowledge is only possessed provided one simply ignores certain error possibilities, then it seems that the degree of cognitive achievement in play here is severely undermined, perhaps decisively so. That is, rather than taking appropriate responsibility for the truth of our beliefs, we are instead, it seems, just trusting that there is not the widespread failure of match between appearance and reality that is encapsulated in sceptical hypotheses. But to say that what is in play here is mere trust seems tantamount to conceding that we are not taking full epistemic responsibility for the truth of our beliefs after all, and thus that what is being exhibited when we are cognitive successful (i.e., when our beliefs are true) is not a cognitive achievement after all.

So on at least one persuasive picture of the value of knowledge, the contextualist is unable to respond to the sceptic in a way which meets the value-theoretic methodological constraint that we have laid-down. That is, what is rescued from the sceptic’s grasp, on this view, is not an epistemic standing that is distinctively valuable. Moreover, when the sceptical argument is re-cast so that it is directed at a distinctively valuable epistemic standing — i.e., when it is formulated as being specifically concerned with high-grade knowledge — the contextualist proposal offers us no way of responding to the sceptical problem. Imposing this constraint thus makes life very difficult indeed for contextualist anti-sceptical proposals.

4.

In the light of this problem for contextualist anti-sceptical proposals, it is worthwhile considering whether neo-Moorean anti-sceptical theses fare any better in this regard. Given the evidential difficulty facing any attempt to show that we can know the denials of sceptical hypotheses that was described above, we can distinguish between two sorts of neo-Moorean anti-sceptical thesis.

The first meets this problem head-on by conceding that our knowledge of the denials of sceptical hypotheses is not evidentially grounded. This is the sort of view defended by Crispin Wright, for example, who argues that we

have a mere “entitlement” in this respect, a quasi-epistemic standing which is explicitly characterised in non-evidential terms.\(^ {11}\) In particular, Wright’s idea is that what grounds this entitlement is not any specific reason which would indicate that the target proposition is true, but rather the fact that commitment to this proposition is essential for any coherent epistemic project.\(^ {12}\) In short, if we want to be believers at all, then we should believe the denials of sceptical hypotheses, even if we have no evidence in support of such a belief.

Given the account of epistemic value offered above, it should be clear that what goes for the contextualist response to the sceptic will also apply here. After all, given closure, the epistemic standing of our beliefs in everyday propositions entails that we have knowledge of the denials of sceptical hypotheses, but if such anti-sceptical knowledge is not evidentially grounded then that calls into question whether the knowledge that is being rescued from the sceptic’s grasp is the distinctively valuable epistemic standing that the sceptic is trying to deprive us of. For if we have no evidence in support of our beliefs in the denials of sceptical hypotheses then we are, in effect, simply groundlessly assuming – or, if you will, trusting – that such hypotheses do not obtain. As we noted above, however, allowing trust to this degree seems to severely undermine the potential to exhibit a genuine cognitive achievement when one knows, and yet there is good reason to think that it is this feature of knowledge which secures its distinctive value.\(^ {13}\)

One might think that the problem here is that the entitlement in question is not a fully epistemic entitlement, but rather more akin to a pragmatic entitlement. Accordingly, one might argue that there are ways in which a belief can be epistemically supported without thereby being evidentially supported, and that it is just such an epistemic standing that would be applicable when it comes to our beliefs in the denials of sceptical hypotheses.

One possibility in this regard would be to offer an epistemic defence of these beliefs on anti-luck grounds. That is, one would argue that the fact that they are beliefs which, if we know much at all, are not true as a matter of luck itself provides them with epistemic support, even though there is no specific

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\(^ {11}\) See Wright, “Warrant for Nothing.”

\(^ {12}\) Note that for the purposes of this essay I am glossing over the issue of whether one’s reasons constitute one’s evidence (and vice versa).

reason to think that the propositions believed are true. This is the sort of view that I have defended in various places.\textsuperscript{14}

On the face of it, this helps out with the problem facing Wright’s view, in that we do regard the fact that one’s belief is not true as a matter of luck as providing genuine epistemic support, even where that belief is not in addition supported by evidence. Even so, the help that this line offers to this proposal is limited. After all, it is far from clear why simply having a belief which is non-luckily true should be particularly valuable. Furthermore, since the nonluckiness of the belief has nothing to do with one’s own cognitive efforts, but is rather merely a fortunate by-product of one being in an epistemically friendly environment, it is hard to see how it would put the knowledge that results into the category of a distinctively valuable cognitive achievement.

It seems, then, that the essence of the problem facing Wright’s view in this regard just resurfaces here, in that it turns out that the epistemic standing of one’s beliefs is hostage to certain error-possibilities not obtaining which, since one has no specific reason for holding that they don’t obtain, ensures that one’s knowledge is not the genuine, and distinctively valuable, cognitive achievement that we typically suppose it to be. Hence, if what we want to rescue from the sceptic’s grasp is an epistemic standing which is distinctively valuable, it seems that we won’t be able to do this via an approach of this sort.\textsuperscript{15}

5.

With the foregoing in mind, one might instead opt for a version of neo-Mooreanism which argues that the epistemic standing of one’s beliefs in the denials of sceptical hypotheses are evidentially grounded after all. This is the sort of line offered (in very different ways), by such diverse figures as John McDowell and Timothy Williamson.\textsuperscript{16} Very roughly, they argue that one’s evidence is at least typically factive, in that it entails that which is it evidence for. So, for example, McDowell argues that – in epistemically friendly environments at least – one’s reason for believing that one has hands is that one sees that \( p \) entails \( p \). But if evidence of this factive sort is possi-

\textsuperscript{14} See, for example, Pritchard, \textit{Epistemic Luck}.

\textsuperscript{15} Note that this does not signal a departure from my earlier view, since it was central to that view that the neo-Moorean response to the sceptic, while formally rescuing knowledge from the sceptic’s grasp, nevertheless does not provide us with the epistemic reassurance that we seek. For more on this point, see Pritchard, \textit{Epistemic Luck}, ch. 9, and Id., “Scepticism, Epistemic Luck and Epistemic Angst.”

ble, then it follows that one’s evidence for believing that one has hands actually entails that one is not the victim of any sceptical hypothesis which is inconsistent with one having hands, such as that one is a BIV. One thus straightforwardly has factive evidence in favour of one’s belief that one is not a BIV.

Clearly, it is going to be essential to such a proposal to allow one’s supporting evidence to come apart in fundamental ways from one’s discriminative abilities, since no party to this debate disputes that one is unable to tell the difference between ordinary experiences and their corresponding sceptical counterparts. Thus, the thought must be that one can have adequate evidence in support of one’s believing that, say, one presently has hands as opposed to being a handless BIV, even though one cannot tell the difference between the ordinary experience of having hands and the “sceptical” experience of being a BIV who merely seems to have hands. It is far from obvious, however, how this is even possible.17

Even if we grant that supporting evidence can come apart from discriminative abilities in this way, however, a salient problem still remains for this approach. After all, if we are to regard the distinctive value of knowledge as residing in the extent to which one is able to take responsibility for the truth of what one believes – such that one’s knowledge counts as a genuine cognitive achievement – then it seems that whether or not one’s knowledge is valuable ought to be proportional to the extent to which one’s knowledge reflects one’s discriminative capacities.

In order to see this, consider one’s knowledge that the creature before one is a zebra. Although controversial, on certain conceptions of the epistemology of testimony it is possible to know a proposition like this on the basis of the testimony of a third party even if one has no independent reason for thinking that this testimony is true (e.g., one is blind, and so cannot see the zebra oneself, one has no other reason for thinking that there should be a zebra before one, and one has no particular reason for thinking that one’s informant is to be trusted on this score). If such knowledge is possible, it surely does not constitute a cognitive achievement, since one’s cognitive success is not ultimately down to one’s own cognitive efforts at all, but rather due to one’s essentially groundless trust of one’s informant.18 In contrast, seeing the zebra for oneself using one’s reliable zebra-detecting abilities would, it seems, furnish one with knowledge that is a bona fide cognitive achievement.

So even if one holds that one’s knowledge of the denials of sceptical

17 As it happens, I do think that this is possible, and I argue for this claim in D. H. Pritchard, “Relevant Alternatives, Perceptual Knowledge, and Discrimination,” *Noûs,* (forthcoming). This is a highly controversial thesis, however.

18 For a defence of the claim that testimonial knowledge of this sort is possible, but that it cannot constitute a cognitive achievement, see Pritchard, “Knowledge, Understanding and Epistemic Value,” and Haddock, Millar & Pritchard, *The Nature,* ch. 2.
hypotheses can be evidentially grounded, once the concession that one necessarily lacks the relevant anti-sceptical discriminatory powers is in place, then it seems that one also jeopardises the thesis that the knowledge that one is rescuing from the sceptic’s grasp is of distinctive value.

6.

Let me close by clarifying what has been argued for here. In particular, let me be explicit that I have not claimed that all anti-sceptical theories will ultimately falter in the light of the value-theoretic methodological constraint that has been argued for here. After all, we have merely examined a few of the main views in superficial outline, and only offered the barest sketch of how the value-theoretic constraint could undermine such views. Moreover, we have only considered one prominent formulation of the sceptical argument and one particular account of the value of knowledge. There is thus a great deal of argumentative work still to be done, on both sides. The point of this paper is thus not to show that contemporary anti-scepticism is in crisis, but rather to (i) motivate the idea that there should be a value-theoretic constraint on the sceptical debate of the type defended here and (ii) show that such a constraint has important ramifications for this debate. I suggest that both of these aims have been met.

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