

SCEPTICISM AND THE POSSIBILITY OF KNOWLEDGE

ABSTRACT. This paper responds to one of the key themes in Quassim Cassam's book, *The Possibility of Knowledge*—viz., the application of the “multi-level” response to ‘how possible?’ questions that he offers to the problem of radical scepticism.

0. Quassim Cassam's subtle book, *The Possibility of Knowledge*,¹ contains many insights. My goal here is not to attempt to give a sense of all that this book has to offer—which I suspect would be foolhardy in the extreme—but rather to explore one particular central theme of this book that I find particularly interesting—viz., the application of the “multi-level” response to ‘how possible?’ questions that Cassam offers to the problem of radical scepticism.

1. A central contention of Cassam's book is that we should re-cast sceptical problems in terms of ‘how possible?’ questions. Although it's not a sceptical problem that Cassam examines himself (because it doesn't concern the possibility of a type of knowledge), consider how this re-casting would work as regards the problem of free will. The relevant ‘how possible?’ question would be:

(HP_{fw}) How is free will possible?

There are two features of ‘how possible?’ questions that are important for our purposes. The first is that they are by their nature challenging in that they imply that there is a standing obstacle to the possibility in question. In the case of (HP_{fw}), this obstacle is the familiar one concerning determinism. The second is that they do not (at least not directly) presuppose that the target thing—in this case free will—is impossible; rather, they simply ask how such a thing could be possible.

These two features of ‘how possible?’ questions impose constraints on what would constitute a satisfactory response to such a question. On the one hand, it would clearly be

pointless to respond to such a question by simply insisting—on the basis of commonsense, say—that the target thing *is* possible, since the question wasn't (directly) suggesting that it wasn't. Instead, some account is required of how such a thing is possible. Moreover, notice that not just any account of how the target thing is possible will do. What is required is, rather, an account which—at the very least—specifically speaks to the obstacle (or obstacles) to that possibility which are at issue.

I think this is just the right way to think about philosophical problems—like the problem of free will or the problem of radical scepticism—which have the form of a *paradox*. What drives these puzzles is not the plausibility of the conclusion of the sceptical argument—that we have no free will, or, say, that knowledge of the external world is impossible—but rather the fact that the premises that led to that conclusion were all individually compelling and yet the conclusion is clearly unacceptable. Accordingly, when we engage with these problems, we are not to think of such engagement in terms of an open consideration of whether the target conclusion is correct; that it is false is rather the *starting-point* of this philosophical investigation. What we want is instead a certain kind of explanation of how, given the standing obstacle to the falseness of this conclusion offered by the existence of this paradox, this conclusion can nevertheless be false. In short, we want an appropriate answer to a 'how possible?' question.

Moreover, once we re-cast these familiar philosophical problems in this guise, it becomes clear why certain responses to these problems are inadequate. Consider, for example, a broadly transcendental response to the problem of free will which maintained that since we have no choice but to regard ourselves as free (it would, after all, be incoherent to reflect on the matter and decide that free will is impossible), one is rationally committed to believing in the possibility of free will. Such a response to the problem clearly does not engage with the target 'how possible?' question at all, since it does not offer any explanation of how free will might be possible, still less any explanation of how it might be possible which removes the relevant obstacle to such a possibility. That transcendental approaches to 'how possible?' questions tend to be inadequate to the task in this way is one of the central claims of Cassam's book—see especially chapter 2—and this demonstrates some of the tremendous theoretical pay-off that comes from thinking of sceptical problems in this way.

2. With all this in mind, let us turn from the problem of free will and examine a sceptical problem that Cassam does consider: scepticism about perceptual knowledge. Cassam (p. 6) re-formulates this type of scepticism into the following ‘how possible’ question:

(HP_{pk}) How is perceptual knowledge possible?

As with the re-casting of the problem of free will above, this formulation of the problem highlights (i) that the issue is not (directly at any rate) whether such knowledge is possible, but rather how it is possible, and (ii) that there is a standing obstacle to such a possibility that needs to be overcome by any adequate response to this problem. Moreover, as with the problem of free will, a transcendental response to this problem is unlikely to offer us what we require. That we are rationally compelled to suppose that we have perceptual knowledge, for example, does not in itself offer us any account of how such knowledge is possible, still less does it explain how this knowledge is possible which speaks to the specific obstacles presupposed by this ‘how possible?’ question.

Cassam proposes that we distinguish between three levels of response to ‘how possible?’ questions. At the most basic level—level one—one way of answering (HP_{pk}) could simply be to identify a means to such knowledge, such as that it is available to us through reliable perception. This is what Cassam (p. 6) calls a “Means Response” to a ‘how possible?’ question. Clearly a means response to (HP_{pk}) does offer us something. If we have a story about how the contested knowledge can be acquired, then we are thereby it seems in possession of a reason to think that the knowledge is possible. Nevertheless, Cassam is surely right that we need far more from a response to this problem than this. In particular, what we will at least require is a level two response to the ‘how possible?’ question, which is a response which removes the obstacle to the possibility of the target knowledge which is presupposed in the how-possible question.

For example, one kind of obstacle that is presupposed by a ‘how possible?’ question like (HP_{pk}) concerns the existence of radical sceptical hypotheses—like the ‘brain-in-a-vat’ sceptical hypothesis—which, it is claimed, we are unable to rule out but which we need to rule out if we are to have perceptual knowledge. Simply specifying a means to the target knowledge—as when one claims that reliable perception is a means to such knowledge—does not speak to this concern at all. What is required, then, is an account of how this knowledge is possible which removes this obstacle.

As Cassam points out (p. 8), there are in fact two ways of removing an obstacle. On the one hand, one might remove an obstacle by overcoming it. On the other hand, one might remove an obstacle more straightforwardly by showing that the putative obstacle is in fact illusory (what Cassam calls an “obstacle-dissipating response”). In terms of the concern about sceptical hypotheses, for instance, an example of the former kind of approach could be to claim that we *can* rule out the relevant sceptical hypotheses after all, and thus that they do not pose the sceptical problem that they are thought to pose. In contrast, an example of the latter kind of approach could be to claim that we do not need to rule such hypotheses out in order to have the knowledge in question.

Does it suffice for an adequate response to a ‘how possible?’ question that it is both a level one and a level two response? Cassam thinks not, and this is one of the central claims of his book. He calls the view that this would suffice “explanatory minimalism” (p. 8) and argues that this minimalist way of dealing with ‘how possible?’ questions is not adequate. In short, his reason for this is that an explanatory minimalist response in effect simply demonstrates that the knowledge in question is not impossible in the manner that the sceptic claims. But there is more, argues Cassam (p. 9), to “explaining how something is possible than showing that it isn’t impossible”. In particular, what is required, argues Cassam, is an account of what makes it possible that we are to acquire the contested knowledge, what Cassam calls the “enabling conditions” for this knowledge. He thus argues for a response to ‘how possible?’ questions that functions on an additional third level.

3. Is Cassam right to reject explanatory minimalism? I think that a lot of what Cassam says in this regard is very compelling, and turns on the intricate and detailed descriptions he offers of particular sceptical problems.² It would take me too far afield to engage with these subtleties of here, so instead I want to raise a more general issue for Cassam’s view. In particular, I want to argue for the general claim that not all explanatorily minimal responses to ‘how possible?’ questions are on par, and that, moreover, some of them *do* seem to offer us just what we are seeking.

The key to seeing this point is to note that there are two very different ways in which one might remove an obstacle to the possibility of one’s knowledge. Consider again sceptical hypotheses and the role they play in traditional sceptical arguments directed at our perceptual

knowledge. The obstacle they pose, recall, is that they seem to both be hypotheses that one must be able to rule out if perceptual knowledge is to be possible while also being the very sort of scenario that one could never rule out. Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that we grant that if these hypotheses cannot be ruled out then the sceptical conclusion is irresistible. Moreover, let us also make the further assumption (even more dubious than the first), that the *only* sceptical obstacle to the possibility of perceptual knowledge is that posed by these sceptical hypotheses. With all this in mind, we will now consider two minimalist responses to (HP_{pk}) which, *qua* minimalist responses, both remove the obstacle posed by sceptical hypotheses, albeit in different ways.

The first response we will consider is just a form of thoroughgoing epistemological externalism which argues that reliability is all that counts for knowledge. Thus, the question of whether one can rule out the relevant sceptical hypotheses just reduces to the question of whether one's beliefs that they are false are reliably formed. Set aside the question of whether reliabilism of this austere variety is very plausible, since that is not our concern here (if you prefer, just assume that it is plausible for the sake of argument). The point is just that such a view does potentially offer an obstacle-overcoming response to the sceptical problem. After all, our reliabilist will simply maintain that whether or not one's belief that one is not the victim of a sceptical hypothesis is reliably formed will depend on how the world in fact is. If such sceptical scenarios are in fact unlikely to be true, then one's belief will be reliably formed; whereas if they are in fact quite likely to be true (or, worse, true), then one's belief will be unreliably formed. Crucially, however, on this view the sceptic would not be able to argue from the mere existence of sceptical hypotheses that perceptual knowledge is impossible, since according to this form of externalism perceptual knowledge *is* possible—depending on the way the world is, one might well have the disputed knowledge.

Such a view is thus a form of explanatory minimalism, in that it specifies a means to the disputed knowledge—through reliable belief-forming processes—while also removing the presupposed obstacle to that knowledge in the form of sceptical hypotheses. In particular, this would be an obstacle-overcoming response to (HP_{pk}) because it concedes the existence of the relevant obstacle—i.e., that we need to be able to rule out sceptical hypotheses if perceptual knowledge is to be possible—while nevertheless claiming that we can overcome this obstacle. Crucially, however, this is a form of explanatory minimalism since this is all that this response to the sceptic does. In particular, it does not attempt to offer a level three

response; rather, it demonstrates that the sceptic is wrong to think that such knowledge is impossible and leaves the matter at that.

Where explanatory minimalism is of this form, I am inclined to think that Cassam is right that it doesn't adequately engage with the problem in hand. But consider now a different form of minimalism. The view that I have in mind is a position defended, albeit in a rather opaque fashion, by John McDowell (e.g., 1995).³ According to this line of argument, the sceptic is, in effect, tricking us into thinking that we are obliged to buy into a conception of rational epistemic support such that our reasons are never able to entail the empirical propositions which they are reasons for. McDowell's line, in contrast, is that it is part of our commonsense picture that such reasons are available. After all, in cases of normal perceptual knowledge we would regard this knowledge as being rationally supported by the fact that we see that such-and-such is the case, where seeing that such-and-such is the case entails that such-and-such is the case.⁴ Moreover, he argues that the sceptic provides no sound philosophical foundation for revising our conception of reasons along the relevant non-factive lines. We are thus entitled to retain our factive conception of reasons. But with this conception of reasons in play, our perceptual knowledge is no longer problematized by sceptical hypotheses, since in epistemically friendly environments—environments in which there is, as a matter of fact, no widespread deception taking place—the rational support we have for our beliefs actually *entails* the denials of these sceptical hypotheses.

As with the reliabilist proposal just considered, we will set to one side the question of how independently plausible this epistemological proposal is.⁵ What is important for our purposes is rather that this proposal, like the reliabilist proposal, offers an explanatory minimalist response to (HP_{pk}). We have a level one response to the problem which specifies a means to that knowledge. In suitable environments, we gain perceptual knowledge via the possession of factive reasons. Moreover, we also have a level two response to the problem since we also have an account of how such knowledge is possible which overcomes the obstacle posed to that knowledge by sceptical hypotheses. That is, as with the reliabilist view described above, this anti-sceptical proposal is happy to grant that sceptical hypotheses pose a genuine obstacle to our perceptual knowledge, while nevertheless claiming that this obstacle can be overcome. Finally, like the reliabilist anti-sceptical proposal, this account also leaves the matter at that and does not further attempt a level three response to the problem.

As with the reliabilist proposal, the claim is rather that the sceptic has been unable to show that knowledge is impossible and thus that this challenge can be safely ignored.

Is the McDowellian anti-sceptical strategy on a dialectical par with the reliabilist anti-sceptical strategy? I think not, for there is a crucial difference between the two types of proposal. In particular, notice that the reliabilist proposal is explicitly *revisionary*, in that it offers a new way of thinking about knowledge according to which the sceptical problem is unable to get a grip, a way of thinking which is conceded as being contrary to the intuitions that led us towards the sceptical paradox. In itself, this is not objectionable. After all, perhaps it is impossible to respond to the sceptical paradox while maintaining our intuitions intact. Accordingly, so long as the revisionary proposal on the table works and is independently motivated, then there seems no in principle reason why we should reject it simply because it is revisionary.

Notice, however, that it is central to the McDowellian proposal that it is meant to be in accord with our pre-theoretical epistemological intuitions, and thus that the view is not meant to be revisionary at all. According to the McDowellian line, the sceptic has in effect tricked us into thinking that a certain epistemological picture is intuitive when in fact it isn't. Put another way, the idea is that it is only when in the grip of a certain theoretical picture that one is led to think of the rational support for one's empirical beliefs as being necessarily non-factive, and the McDowellian strategy is to remind us that intuition in fact dictates a very different conclusion.

In his seminal book on the problem of radical scepticism, Barry Stroud (1984, 84) famously argued that the sceptical problem was a paradox in that it arose purely out of "platitudes" that we would all otherwise accept. If this is right, then any response to the sceptical problem will necessarily be a revisionary one, since it will entail that we must reject at least one of the platitudes that led to the paradox. The claim that McDowell is making, however, is that at least one of the putative platitudes that is generating the sceptical problem is illusory, and thus that revisionism is not forced upon us after all. In effect, what this illustrates is that we need to make a further distinction regarding the way in which obstacles can be overcome, depending on whether the obstacles are overcome via appeal to a revisionary account of knowledge which preserves the intuitive force of the obstacles or via appeal to an account of knowledge which demonstrates that these obstacles do not have the intuitive force that they are usually thought to have.⁶

It is thus far from clear that a form of explanatory minimalism that is obstacle-overcoming in the manner of the McDowellian strategy is obviously lacking in any relevant respect. Remember that it is the paradoxical nature of the sceptical problem—that it is apparently arising out of mere “platitudes”—that generates the awful feeling of epistemic vertigo we experience when we try to respond to this problem. With the sceptical problem shown to be illusory, however, why should we seek any further anti-sceptical account of the contested knowledge? In particular, if McDowell is right that it is only when in the grip of a faulty and ungrounded philosophical picture that we are led to think that there is a sceptical paradox, and thus to wonder how perceptual knowledge is possible, then surely a philosophical story which leads us back into our intuitive, and scepticism-hostile, epistemological picture gives us all we should want from a response to the sceptical problem.

At the very least, then, I am suggesting that the kind of explanatory minimalism that you find in the McDowellian strategy is not on a dialectical par with the kind of explanatory minimalism that you find in the reliabilist strategy, such that the former offers a more intellectually satisfying resolution to the problem. Moreover, I am further suggesting that an anti-sceptical response of this sort ought to suffice; or, at least, that it is not clear to me why it does not suffice.

It could be, of course, that what is ultimately at issue here is what the distinction between explanatory minimalism and explanatory anti-minimalism amounts to, and perhaps Cassam might argue that the McDowellian account, as I have described it, is tantamount to a level three response. If that is the case, then this would be very useful to know, since it would clarify what Cassam has in mind in this regard. I suspect, though, that with the distinction between revisionary and non-revisionary responses to the sceptical problem in play, it is clear not just that not all forms explanatory minimalism are on a par but also, more importantly, that sometimes one can offer a perfectly adequate response to a ‘how possible?’ question which does not go beyond level two of the multi-levels framework that Cassam sets out.⁷

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NOTES

¹ Cassam (2007). All page numbers are to this text.

² Indeed, I think that the distinction between explanatory minimalism and explanatory anti-minimalism that Cassam expounds offers us one way of making sense of the so-called 'metaepistemological' debate regarding scepticism that dominated epistemology in the 1980s and 1990s, a debate which was murky, to say the least. In particular, I think that one can read Stroud's (e.g., 1994; 1996) famous complaints against the adequacy of contemporary anti-sceptical views as essentially arising out of his rejection of the explanatory minimalism that these views presupposed, though I have not the space to explore this point in detail here.

³ In the relevant respects, such a view can also be found in the work of Williams (e.g., 1991), and also, arguably, in Wittgenstein (1969). For more on the relevance of Wittgenstein to this sort of anti-sceptical stance, see Pritchard (2005; forthcoming).

⁴ For McDowell, seeing that *p*, while it necessarily puts one in a position to know that *p*, does not entail that one does know that *p*. Interestingly, Cassam (see, e.g., §1.4), following Williamson (e.g., 2000, ch. 2) and others, argues that it *does* entail knowing that *p*. I think this is a mistake, though I have not the space to argue this point here.

⁵ Interestingly, McDowell himself does not feel under any explanatory burden to offer a full exposition and defence of this epistemological proposal, and this reflects, no doubt, a general philosophical quietism on his part. Nevertheless, there are, I would argue, ways of offering such an exposition and defence. See, for example, Neta & Pritchard (2007) and Pritchard (2008) for defences of a McDowellian epistemology in the light of certain problems that it might seem to face.

⁶ One might try to capture this contrast in terms of Cassam's own distinction between obstacle-overcoming and obstacle-dissolving level two responses. That is, one might argue that there is at least a sense in which the McDowellian strategy is dissolving the relevant obstacle, in that it is showing that this obstacle lacks the intuitive force that it is meant to have. I think that this way of describing the matter, however, does not do the

proposal just because it fails to recognise just how radical this proposal is. For although the McDowellian strategy does demonstrate that the obstacle lacks its intuitive force, it nonetheless also allows that this is a genuine obstacle, albeit one that poses no bar to the possibility of perceptual knowledge. The view is therefore best regarded as obstacle-overcoming rather than obstacle-dissolving.

⁷ Thanks to Quassim Cassam.