

*Critical Discussion*

GRECO ON SCEPTICISM – A CRITICAL DISCUSSION

Greco, J. *Putting Sceptics in Their Place: The Nature of Skeptical Arguments and Their Role in Philosophical Inquiry*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, 280 pp., ISBN 052177263x, £ 47.50 (cloth).

In his recent and influential book John Greco (2000) argues for the following three theses regarding scepticism about our knowledge of the external world:

- T1 “[...] skeptical arguments make no obvious mistake and therefore cannot be easily dismissed [...]”;
- T2 “[...] the analysis of skeptical arguments is philosophically useful and important and should therefore have a central place in the methodology of philosophy, particularly in the methodology of epistemology [...]”;
- T3 “[...] taking sceptical arguments seriously requires us to adopt an externalist, reliabilist epistemology.” (1)

In arguing for these three theses, Greco is guided by the following methodological claim, which he terms “Strong Particularism”:

SP *Strong Particularism*. “An adequate theory of knowledge should do a good job of organizing our pre-theoretical intuitions about what cases count as knowledge.” (15)

There is a sense, of course, in which SP merely constitutes common sense. It is almost a triviality to say that it is better to have a theory of knowledge which accords with our pre-theoretical intuitions than one that doesn't. Greco's construal of SP is not along these lines, however, and this can be seen by how he takes SP to entail two further claims, both of which are contentious.

Here is the first:

SI *Sceptical Immunity*. "Any theory that has radical sceptical consequences does not capture the concept of knowledge in use, because it conflicts with our pre-theoretical intuitions." (16)

Greco's construal of SP involves more than just the claim that we should try to rescue our pre-theoretical intuitions about knowledge if we can, which is consistent with any one of those intuitions being ceded in order to rescue the others. Instead, he takes SP to license the conclusion that certain *specific* pre-theoretical intuitions should not be given up under any circumstances, such as our anti-sceptical intuition that we know a great deal.

Still, one might contend that this way of understanding SP is not quite so implausible once one reflects that to allow scepticism would probably undermine a great deal of our pre-theoretical intuitions about knowledge. Moreover, Greco's claim is that although we can legitimately take it for granted that sceptical arguments must be mistaken in some way, this does not lessen the methodological utility of taking such arguments seriously since in understanding why they are mistaken we will come to recognise some important epistemological truths.

The second claim which Greco takes to be entailed by SP is even more problematic:

PP *Psychological Plausibility*. "[Any theory...] should be consistent with our common-sense judgements about our own cognitive abilities, and with our best cognitive science as well." (18)

Again, SP is being understood such that it disallows a specific set of our pre-theoretical intuitions to be ceded. Moreover, whilst it may well be a plausible consequence of SP that one should seek an epistemological theory that is consistent with one's common-sense judgements about our cognitive abilities, it is far from obvious why consistency with best cognitive science should be entailed by SP. After all, what if, as seems likely, best cognitive science conflicts with our common-sense judgements about our cognitive abilities? If the guiding moral of SP is that we should be true to our pre-theoretical intuitions about knowledge, then surely this would mean that, where the two conflict, our common-sense judgements in this regard should trump the theoretical conclusions offered by our best theories in cognitive science. If this is the case, however, then Greco should drop the demand that our epistemological theories must answer to best cognitive science *as well as* our common-sense judgements about our cognitive abilities. At the very least, he should argue for this claim on grounds that are independent of SP and explain what we should do,

with SP in mind, when common-sense and best cognitive science conflict.

This point is important because Greco's diagnosis of what is wrong with the sceptical argument rests on just this problematic feature of PP. According to Greco, sceptical arguments go wrong because they employ the following mistaken thesis about the relationship between our knowledge of the external world and our knowledge of the way in which the world appears to us:

*IT Inference Thesis.* "[...] If I am to know how objects in the world are, it must be via some good inference from how things appear to me." (84)

Since Greco grants that there is no valid inference, either inductive or deductive, from the nature of our appearances to reality, hence it follows that unless one is able to motivate a rejection of this thesis then the sceptic will have no trouble establishing her sceptical conclusion. It is therefore essential that Greco is able to reject IT.

Greco argues against IT on the grounds that it clashes with his guiding epistemological methodology, as represented by SP. Crucially, however, the manner in which IT clashes with SP primarily concerns how it is incompatible with a consequence of SP, PP. In particular, the key problem with IT, according to Greco, is that it does not accord with our best cognitive scientific theories. He writes:

[...] it is empirically false that human cognition employs anything like an inference from appearance to reality. (95)

The key problem with IT is thus not that our pre-theoretical intuitions about knowledge are in conflict with it – indeed, Greco grants that IT is in fact derived from “assumptions” that are not only “plausible” but also “widely accepted” (96) – but rather that recent empirical research in the cognitive sciences has shown that this claim is false. And since best cognitive science tells us that we do not gain our knowledge of the world via our knowledge of the way the world appears to us, hence it follows, according to Greco, that we should abandon IT and hold that one can have knowledge of the external world which is not inferentially dependent upon one's prior knowledge of the way in which the world appears. Contrary to the guiding methodology encapsulated in SP, then, Greco is here siding with best cognitive theory over pre-theoretical intuition.

To make matters worse, closer inspection of Greco's analysis of scepticism reveals that IT isn't the source of the sceptical challenge after all. Accordingly, merely denying this principle will not suffice to

resolve this challenge, nor will accepting it in itself make one's epistemological theory susceptible to the sceptical problem.

In order to see this point, it is necessary to first identify just why Greco holds that there is no way in which one could appropriately employ an inductive inference in order to derive one's knowledge of the external world from one's knowledge of how the world appears. Greco's claim here is that such an inference would only be legitimate provided one was entitled to accept the following assumption about the general reliability of our senses:

GSR *General Sense Reliability*. Our sense-experience beliefs regarding how the world appears are, in general, a reliable guide to how the world is.

As regards Hume's arguments against our knowledge of the external world, for instance, Greco writes:

What is needed with sensory appearances is the assumption that such appearances are a reliable guide to reality. (28)

And later:

[... T] here appearing to be an apple tree does not make probable the belief that there is an apple tree, without the assumption that, at least in general, the way things appear is a reliable indication of the way things are. (31)

Moreover, Greco also argues that, understood in its strongest possible form, Descartes's dreaming argument also turns on the need to make this assumption of general reliability:

The point is the same that we saw in the discussion of [*Hume's sceptical arguments about the external world*]: my sensory appearances do not even make likely the proposition that I am not dreaming, unless I am also assuming, at least implicitly, that sensory appearances are a reliable guide to reality. (59)

According to Greco, however, the problem posed by this need to assume GSR is that there are no non-circular empirical grounds for believing this assumption since the only grounds that one could cite would already assume a relationship between appearance and reality, and yet it is this relationship which is at issue in the sceptical argument. Hence, argues Greco, there is no good inductive argument which is able to ground our knowledge of the external world on our knowledge of how the external world appears.

If one rejects IT, however, as Greco does, then this problem does not arise because one is then able to gain one's knowledge of the external world directly without having to make a prior inferential appeal to one's knowledge of how the world appears. With IT identified as the source of the sceptical challenge, all Greco need do is

identify the kind of epistemological view which does not make use of IT. In this respect Greco is quite clear that the sort of epistemology that is needed must be an externalist reliability theory, since only this view can account for our empirical knowledge of the external world without demanding the kind of inferences at issue in IT. Put simply, the idea is that just so long as we are indeed forming beliefs via processes that are reliable then we can acquire knowledge without it being necessary for these beliefs to be further supported by non-circular grounds.<sup>1</sup> As Greco puts the point:

According to reliabilism, a belief has positive epistemic status (roughly) just in case it is in fact reliably formed. Put in terms of evidence, the grounds on which a person forms her belief amount to good evidence (again roughly) just in case those grounds are in fact a reliable indication that the belief is true. There is no requirement that the person knows that her grounds are reliable, or even that she could know this on reflection. (5)

So just as long as, for example, my perceptual faculties are producing beliefs about the external world in a reliable fashion, then I can have knowledge of the external world without having to make a non-circular inference from the way that the world appears to judgements about the way that the world is. We thus get the transition from these T1 to T3 that we saw above, in that serious reflection on the sceptical problem is unearthing an important epistemological claim that we must deny (T1, T2) and which thereby prompts us to advance a specific sort of epistemological theory that is understood along externalist, reliabilist lines (T3).

The problem with this reasoning, however, is that it is hard to see just why the finger of blame should be attached to IT in the sceptical argument. After all, the source of scepticism seems to lie, by Greco's lights, not in the specific demand that one's knowledge of the external world should be inferential in the fashion described by IT, but rather in the general internalist demand that one should always be in the possession of adequate (i.e., non-circular) supporting grounds in favour of one's beliefs (or at least be able to cite such grounds, if called upon to do so). With this internalist requirement in play scepticism could be motivated entirely independently of IT. Moreover, with this requirement dropped, one could evade scepticism whilst retaining IT.

Let's begin with the first point, that one could motivate scepticism by appealing to internalism without needing to also employ IT. Suppose, for example, that one allows that one can have knowledge of the external world without having to inferentially base that knowledge on one's knowledge of the way the world appears to one,

in opposition to IT. Still, by anyone's lights (and certainly by Greco's lights), it would be necessary that the following more general assumption of reliability be at least true if one is to have such knowledge:

*GR General Reliability.* The cognitive processes through which one forms one's beliefs about the external world are generally reliable.

After all, if the cognitive processes one employed were not generally reliable – if, for example, one was being systematically deceived in the manner of a radical sceptical hypothesis – then it is hard to see how one could ever gain any knowledge of substance regarding the external world, even if one's belief in the target proposition were, as it happens, true. Clearly, however, if one is persuaded by Greco's argument that we have no non-circular grounds for holding GSR, then it is hard to see why one would not be equally persuaded by the claim that we do not have any non-circular grounds for holding the more general GR either. This being so, once the internalist requirement has been motivated then one can defend scepticism about our knowledge of the external world without having to make any use of IT.

Suppose, for example, that one is forming one's beliefs about the external world by simply using one's perceptual faculties, and therefore is not making the kind of inference at issue in IT. Nevertheless, on the internalist account it will be essential that one's belief is adequately supported by grounds that one can, even if only in principle, cite in favour of that belief. Accordingly, if one is to have knowledge of what one believes via this cognitive process then, intuitively at least, it is going to be essential that one has adequate supporting grounds for believing GR. That these grounds are lacking therefore indicates that one is unable to have such knowledge on the internalist account, and hence the sceptic is home and dry, with or without an appeal to IT.

Next, consider the second point, that one could evade scepticism with IT intact just so long as one adopted externalism. Suppose it were true that our knowledge of the external world was inferentially dependent upon our knowledge of the way in which the world appears to us. There is no reason why this concession should lead to scepticism, however, provided that we are not committed to an internalist epistemology. After all, by the lights of an externalist epistemology, just so long as GSR is true, then any inference from the way the world appears to the way that it is will not be undermined by the considerations that Greco raises.

Accordingly, for all the reasons that we have been given for thinking the contrary, such an inference could well be knowledge-supporting. Of course, the internalist will balk at this suggestion and insist that mere truth here is not enough – one should also have independent grounds for thinking that GSR holds. But why should an externalist (like Greco) be persuaded by this sort of consideration?

Moreover, it is not as if Greco can object here that to make such a move is no not to take the sceptical challenge seriously, since this line of response to scepticism takes the problem just as seriously as Greco's own anti-sceptical proposal, if not more so. Just as Greco must groundlessly assume that GR is true if he is to suppose that he has the anti-sceptical knowledge that he takes himself to have, so the externalist who endorses IT must groundlessly assume that GSR is true. Moreover, by Greco's lights at least, GSR has a better standing than GR since it is meant to be part of our pre-theoretical conception of how we gain knowledge of the external world, and so it is given additional support by SP.

This brings us back to the observation that we made above that Greco's construal of SP simply assumes the denial of scepticism from the outset. The point is that if we adduce the strong anti-sceptical reading of SP as a methodological assumption in our engagement with the sceptic then it immediately follows that we are entitled to maintain reliability assumptions like GSR and GR right from the start without any further argument. This is because, by anyone's lights, it is only if these assumptions are at least true that we could be in a position to have the widespread knowledge of the external world that we pre-theoretically ascribe to ourselves in the first place. But if this is right then, given that we are unable to have any adequate grounds for believing these reliability assumptions as Greco claims, it is little wonder that the solution to the sceptical problem ends up being externalism, since the moral to be drawn is the general externalist one that all that counts if we are to have widespread knowledge is only that these reliability assumptions are *true*, not that we have adequate grounds for believing them. Accordingly, we don't need the sophisticated argumentation that Greco offers in favour of his particular brand of anti-scepticism, and we certainly don't need to concern ourselves unduly about the status of IT. Instead, we just need to note that our widespread self-ascription of knowledge regarding the external world is consistent with the absence of appropriate supporting grounds, and that the only type of anti-sceptical

epistemological theory that can accommodate this conclusion is an externalist theory.

So whilst each of the three theses that Greco argues for may well be true, they are not true in quite the manner that he supposes.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Greco actually puts a number of constraints on the kinds of reliable processes that can be knowledge-supporting in this respect, but we need not get into the details of his account here since nothing hangs on them for our purposes.

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