

Preface

I once overheard a telling conversation between two of my colleagues. One asked the other about a new book on a topic of some importance to both of them. He asked whether they would have to do anything different because of the book. The second colleague said not, so the first colleague said he would not read the book. The conversation encapsulates an excellent test of the worth of a philosophical work: an idea is important if as a result of it experts will have to change what they do when they work on the idea's topic. It's not good enough to get it right, or to choose an important topic, or to choose a topic of contemporary interest, or to come up with something original; it isn't even enough to do all of these things. I know now that much of the work I have done, especially as a graduate student, failed that test—even work that found its way into leading philosophy journals.

However, due in part to some dumb luck, I have stumbled across what I believe to be a worthy idea, one that epistemologists cannot ignore. It is, in effect, a new kind of argument for a new kind of radical scepticism. It must be admitted that the notion of scepticism elicits strange behaviour in philosophers, especially epistemologists. Many philosophers, even contemporary ones who should know better, sometimes assert that no one is really a sceptic. Philosophers are pretty much professionally *forbidden* from being radical sceptics, even though we aren't forbidden from believing any of many other comparably outlandish claims (e.g., see Chapter 5 and Section B of Chapter 11 of this essay). Scepticism is commonly, and justifiably, thought to be an epistemic pit with particularly nasty properties. If you are in that pit, so is everyone else; there is no practical way of coming out of the pit and into the light of knowledge; and you most likely have a serious cognitive or epistemic deficit, some kind of failure of your epistemic systems. But, as I will presently show, while these claims hold for traditional forms of scepticism, none of them apply to the sceptical theories I explore here. The sceptical snares that these new theories lay forth apply to just some people (e.g., many philosophers and many scientists), are caused by some pretty random sociological events, are fallen into only in adulthood, can be escaped on one's own or with the help of others, and indicate no epistemic deficit of any significance. In fact, falling into the

sceptical snare is actually an improvement in epistemic standing compared to most who have the knowledge denied to those in the snare. That's right: the person who knows is epistemically inferior to the person who doesn't know. If I'm not mistaken, we have an entirely new kind of scepticism.

In this essay I have restricted myself to investigating the new sceptical argument. I have discussed as little as possible traditional arguments for traditional forms of scepticism. I have not presented my best guesses as to how particular anti-sceptics will react to my new sceptical arguments. I do this not out of any disrespect, but in order to make the essay relatively short, unified, and not cumbersome. I have ignored most traditional epistemological disputes and theories. I have resisted, with effort, the temptation to blather on about my own pet peeves and ideas. I have, with the exception of this preface and a few other places, attempted to avoid the word 'I'. I have done all this in the hopes that a short book restricted to presenting the case for the new scepticism is less distracting than a long one that drifts from the main task. It's also easier to write.

This essay would have been an article of reasonable length if I had not been so anti-sceptical by both inclination and training. More than half of the essay is devoted to filling out the details of the sceptical solution to the sceptical puzzles generated by my arguments in the first part of the essay (with the intention of finding problems with that sceptical solution), and investigating anti-sceptical responses to those puzzles. The new sceptical arguments conclude that I don't know some very ordinary facts that one would think are very easily known. For instance, I don't know that my shirt is red, that I currently have a throbbing pain in my knee, or even that I *believe* that my shirt is red or that my knee is throbbing. These are difficult results to swallow, certainly quite contrary to common sense, and in this essay I have done my best to avoid swallowing them. As far as I have determined, I have failed. My current best guess is that many philosophers and most members of certain classes of scientists lack these and analogous ordinary pieces of knowledge, if not today then perhaps in our future and definitely in some very realistic possible worlds. Much of the interest in the new kind of scepticism lies in its scope and strength. Regarding strength, *these results remain even if we adopt all the clever anti-sceptical fixes thought up in recent years*: for instance, reliability, proper functioning, relevant alternatives, contextualism, and the rejection of epistemic closure.

That is, even if one or more of those anti-sceptical strategies succeeds in defeating the traditional arguments for radical scepticism, the new sceptical arguments go through. Regarding scope, even if my sceptical arguments are sound, you are free to know millions of exotic truths such as the fact that black holes exist! You can know about the existence of black holes, but not about the colour of your shirt or even about what you believe regarding the colour of your shirt. What kind of scepticism is this?

Enough teasing! Here is the brutally short and crude version of my long and exceedingly sophisticated argument. In order to know P , one must be able to rule out some $\neg P$ possibilities. For instance, in order to know that the tree is a fir, one has to rule out the possibility that it's a spruce or a hemlock. At least, one has to rule out those possibilities provided they are real, scientifically respectable, 'live' hypotheses; one is aware that they have such respect; and one is perfectly aware that those hypotheses conflict with one's belief that the tree is a fir. For instance, you came across the tree while taking a stroll through a forest with a tree expert. You said the tree was a fir, but she said that it's quite hard to tell from this vantage-point because spruces and hemlocks look the same and there are lots of them around here. Those $\neg P$ possibilities are 'relevant alternatives', as it is often said. Perhaps the brain-in-a-vat possibility doesn't need to be ruled out; but the spruce and hemlock possibilities do need to be ruled out. Assuming I can't rule out the spruce possibility, I don't know that the tree is a fir—even if the tree is a fir. At least, I don't know it's a fir tree once I'm *aware* of the live status of the spruce and hemlock possibilities.

But now here's the kicker: there are several real, scientifically respectable, 'live' hypotheses that can be used in the very same argument template as in the previous paragraph. It's a real, live scientifically expert-endorsed possibility—at least in some possible worlds next door to ours—that no ordinary objects are coloured, that no one believes anything, that no one has any character traits, and that all pains are in brains only. Using the line of reasoning from the tree story, we can show that those of us aware of the live status of these four error theories don't know that fire-engines are red, don't know that we sometimes have pains in our lower backs, don't know that John Rawls was kind, and don't even know that we *believe* any of those truths. However, people unfamiliar with philosophy and cognitive science do know all those things, as they are well outside the

domain of philosophy and cognitive science. And all of this holds on the mere assumption that those error theories are *false* but live. Finally, there is an intriguing way to transform the live sceptic's argument into one for universal scepticism, the thesis that we know absolutely nothing.

'Yes, but those cases are different from the tree case, and those differences will block the route to the new scepticism.' Maybe so, but it turns out to be awfully hard to back up this intuition. I have been unable to find any way to justify it—and I'm anti-sceptical by nature. Furthermore, even if the intuition is right, we can derive some very interesting epistemological results from the subsequent denial of the new scepticism. So, no matter what our reaction to the live sceptic's argument, we walk away with interesting results. In that respect, we all win.

Thanks are due to the University of Leeds for granting me a semester of research leave to work on a boring project that I abandoned in favour of writing this book. Thanks also to a *Noûs* referee (a presentation of the book's main line of argument appears in my 'When a Skeptical Hypothesis is Live', which is forthcoming in *Noûs*), Paul Bloomfield, David Chalmers, Richard Fumerton, Sanford Goldberg, John Greco, Ken Himma, Sarah McGrath, Joseph Melia, Peter Millican, Mark Nelson, Duncan Pritchard, and Tom Stoneham for written or oral comments, and to the faculties at the University of Liverpool and the University of Connecticut for helpful discussion. Special thanks are due to my generous friend Andrew McGonigal, with whom I discussed the issues raised in this book on many very fruitful occasions, and my wife Margaret Frances, for offering substantive comments on the entire essay. Without their good sense and perceptive comments the book would have had many more mistakes and fewer insights.

BRSF