

WHY SHOULDN'T WE BE AFRAID OF THE CARTESIAN DEMON?

On the Roots of Skepticism

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I will argue that it is not so much the Demon that is threatening our knowledge, but rather the assumption concerning the justification involved in the Demon-type skeptical arguments. This notion of justification is unreasonable and would not allow knowledge even if there were no Demon at all.

The Demon-type skeptical argument

Roughly put the Demon hypothesis is the following.

(H) An evil demon causes me to have those beliefs which imitate the world, but there is nothing beyond me, my beliefs, and the Demon.

This Demon generates doubt in the following way. If this Demon exists, which I cannot exclude, then I would have no *guarantee* for the truth of my beliefs. The doubt is directed against the justification of my beliefs and not against their truth. Thus the skeptical argument attacks the justification of propositions by a simple modus tollens. For example:

If I am justified in believing that I am reading a paper, then, since this proposition entails the denial of the Demon hypothesis, I am justified in believing the denial of the Demon hypothesis.

I am not justified in denying the Demon hypothesis.

Therefore, I am not justified in believing that I am reading a paper.

The justification of any proposition about the world can be challenged by this argument, but, of course, propositions concerning, e.g., language, mind, rational reasoning, etc. are not called into question.

Potential defeaters

Let us have a look at this skeptical argument from a slightly different angle and ask what features of the skeptical hypothesis were made use of. Knowing them we could generalize the argument. Any proposition meeting the conditions could serve to challenge the justifications of propositions about the world or the justifications of certain range of propositions.

Obviously, we do not have to stick to the Demon, an all-mighty computer with brains in a vat would do just as well. It is not the particular content of the skeptical hypothesis that matters, rather its epistemic relation to the given proposition.

To ruin the justification of a particular proposition, p by means of the skeptical argument above, we need a defeater hypothesis, q , such that

C1. p entails the denial of q

C2. p does not justify the denial of q
(for all the evidence available for p is consistent with q)

C3. the denial of q is not justified by the available evidence.

Let us call a proposition satisfying the first two conditions a potential defeater of the justification of p . Any proposition, q satisfying the first two conditions can challenge the justification of a proposition p unless the denial of q is justified.

The notion of justification

Now we should return to the skeptical argument in order to see what notion of justification is assumed. For a proposition p and for any of the potential defeaters of its justification q , the general form of the skeptical argument is:

If S is justified in believing that p , then S is justified in believing the denial of the potential defeater q .

S is not justified in denying q .

Therefore, S is not justified in believing that p .

Being a conditional, the first premiss asserts that we have to justify the denial of every potential defeater of the justification of a proposition in order to be justified in believing the proposition. In other words, the justification of the denial of every single potential defeater is a necessary condition for the justification of a proposition. Notice that this follows simply from the logical relation between the antecedent and the consequent of a conditional.

The problems with this notion of justification

The notion of justification assumed by the argument is a rather bizarre one. For we are justified in believing a proposition only if we are justified in believing that there exists no defeater and to know that there exists no defeater we should be justified in denying every single potential defeater of the justification of the proposition. Let us put aside philosophers' colorful fantasies about Demons and all-mighty computers, and focus on mundane everyday cases. Even in such cases, we would almost never have justified beliefs concerning factual matters if this notion of justification were adopted. Let us see why.

Firstly, infinitely many potential defeaters can be devised for the justification of every factual proposition and they all need to be rebutted. The basic idea is this. Even non-skeptical epistemologies should allow the possibility of error. We may be wrong about almost every particular factual beliefs. (Which obviously does not involve that all of our beliefs may be wrong.) And we may be wrong about a particular belief in infinitely many ways. Hence we may formulate infinitely many hypotheses about how we are mistaken about a particular belief. Many of these hypotheses can serve as a potential defeater in skeptical arguments.

Here is an example. Casual evidence can be adduced to justify the factual proposition that I am holding a piece of paper.

Then, in the skeptical argument, q can be replaced by the following propositions:

(H1) *What I am holding now is a sheet made of a new material which only looks like paper.*

(H2) *I am dreaming now.*

(H3) *We all have certain mental disorder called conference madness which is causing us to believe that I am holding a piece of paper.*

We cannot claim that we are justified in believing that I am holding a piece of paper until all of these potential defeaters are eliminated. Since if they are not eliminated, the standard form of the skeptical argument can be used to challenge the justification. It is important to emphasize that these potential defeater hypotheses can be refuted. As we are considering ordinary situations, the first can be refuted by some chemical analysis, the second by one of our ordinary ways how we distinguish between dreaming and being awoken, and, finally, the third can be rebutted if we all go through a thorough psychiatric check-up. So the problem with these hypotheses is not that they cannot be refuted, but rather that there are too many of them, and all need to be refuted before we could claim that a proposition is justified.

But my opponent may claim that this problem is to be regarded as a mere practical one. In principle, he may go on, all the potential defeaters can be eliminated and thus eventually we arrive at a justified factual proposition. But unfortunately, this is not so. Because the justification of the denial of a potential defeater would again require the justification of the denial of all the defeaters of this justification, and so on. The exponential boom seems inevitable.

Secondly, a further problem emerges due to the assumption that the justification requires the justification of the denial of its potential defeaters. Because we can construct, for almost every proposition, a trivial potential defeater the denial of which is not justifiable.

The proposition, „I am holding a piece of paper.“ is not true for unknown reasons in a way that is consistent with whatever we know.

Of course, it is unjustifiable that there are no unknown reasons defeating the justification of a proposition. It is important to notice that this trivial potential defeater is weaker than the Demon hypothesis only from rhetorical or psychological viewpoints, but not from the point of view of its epistemological status.

In sum, the Demon-type skeptical argument assumes a notion of justification which is senseless and useless anyway. Because in this sense of justification we would have no justified belief even in those casual cases in which we wish to claim that we have some. If you

like to put it this way, it would be impossible to justify beliefs even at the phenomenological level. This notion of justification by itself is enough to deem us to a piecemeal though total skepticism. Even if we could get rid of the Demon, we would left with a notion of justification according to which no knowledge would be possible. Instead of being afraid of the Demon, we should be worried about the notion of justification at the first place.

The considerations above was meant to locate what the problem is with the skeptical argument. I think the skeptical argument is wrong not because of the subjectivist starting point of the underlying philosophy, or because it is supported by a foundationalist epistemology (These may give rise problems on their own too.), or because of the Principle of Closure, etc., but rather because the skeptical argument assumes an irrational notion of justification. My objections did not rely on the details of what a justification consists in. Therefore it applies for different kinds of justifications and thus it is consistent with different kinds of epistemologies. You could even be a social constructivist from the point of view of my argument. (But it is an extreme for other reasons.)

The defect of potential defeaters and the illegitimate shift in the burden of proof

The root of the flaw is that this notion of justification takes as if it were enough for a potential defeater to be consistent with the challenged justification. It fails to require that a potential defeater should be justified.

To get a reasonable notion of potential defeater which is in accordance with the normal course of inquire, and to prevent the ad hoc use of the skeptical argument, we should add a further condition to the earlier two.

C2+ A potential defeater q is justified, even if only slightly so.

It stands to reason that if a defeater is not justified than we should not bother to refute it. On the other way round, according to our practice, if a potential defeater is justified even if only weakly so, then the justification of a proposition would, indeed, include the justification of the denial of its potential defeater.

The skeptical argument involves an illegitimate and fallacious shift in the burden of proof. The skeptic claims that if our beliefs are justified than the rebuttal of the Demon hypothesis is justified. Hence if the antiskeptical wants to see our beliefs safely warranted then he has to justify the denial of the skeptic hypothesis. The skeptic violates an argumentative rule by placing the burden of proof on the antiskeptical. The antiskeptical has to justify the denial of every potential defeaters, though it is not told why the antiskeptical

should do so. It was the skeptic who introduced the claim concerning the Demon into the discussion, and according to the rules of reasonable discussion, the burden of proof is in general (some exceptions apart) on the one who claimed something. Therefore, first, it would be the skeptic's turn to give reasons why we should entertain the idea of the existence of such a demon, why we should believe the Demon hypothesis.

As I argued unless we are given reasons why bother with a potential defeater, we are not bound to be justified denying it. Because otherwise we tacitly accept a senseless notion of justification, which leads to a piecemeal, but, eventually, total skepticism also without the Demon.