

DOUBTING

Contemporary Perspectives on Skepticism

Edited by

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STEWART COHEN

SKEPTICISM AND EVERYDAY KNOWLEDGE ATTRIBUTIONS

One of the more puzzling aspects of the issues concerning skepticism is the stark contrast between our everyday assertions concerning what we know and the conclusions of skeptical arguments. Skeptical arguments, which appear to be quite formidable, conclude that we know very little, whereas in everyday life we attribute a considerable amount of knowledge to ourselves.

What should we say about this contrast? Of course the skeptic must say that our everyday knowledge attributions are in some way mistaken. But if we are making a mistake when we attribute knowledge to ourselves in everyday life, exactly what kind of mistake is it?

On the other hand, most of us are not skeptics. We will then have to provide a different account of the relationship between skeptical arguments and our everyday pattern of knowledge attributions. We can claim that the skeptic is simply mistaken or we can claim that the situation is more complex — that the claims of the skeptic do not necessarily threaten our ordinary knowledge attributions.

Thus, there are a number of ways that one might construe the relationship between skepticism and ordinary life and, of course, different ways of construing that relation will have different consequences for the issues raised by skepticism. What I propose to do is to examine the feasibility of these various ways of construing the relationship between skepticism and everyday life. In particular, I want to examine the view that our everyday pattern of knowledge attributions provides the basis for a response to skeptical arguments.

Typically, skeptical arguments claim that the cases that we ordinarily think of as knowledge fall short of the standards required for knowledge. The argument proceeds by calling our attention to alternative hypotheses to what we ordinarily believe that we are unable to eliminate.¹ The skeptic then claims that our inability to eliminate these alternatives entails that we do not know what we believe. For example, the skeptic argues that we know that we see a zebra at the zoo only if we can eliminate the alternative that we see a cleverly disguised mule and we can not eliminate this alternative; or more generally that we can know anything (on the basis of our senses) only if we can eliminate the alternative² that we are not dreaming and that we cannot eliminate this alternative.³

If this is the skeptical challenge, then what exactly is the nature of the response provided by our everyday pattern of knowledge attributions? Responses of this kind enjoyed great popularity during the heyday of ordinary language philosophy. J. L. Austin and others argued vigorously that the ordinary use of instances of the schema "S knows P" shows that the skeptical arguments depend on illegitimately raising the requirements or standards that we apply in everyday life.⁴ Ordinarily we do not require that someone be able to eliminate the kinds of alternatives that the skeptic raises, e.g., that we are seeing a cleverly disguised mule or that we are dreaming, in order to be able to claim correctly to know. In everyday life, we claim to know a considerable amount

even though the skeptic's very strict standards are not met. In most ordinary contexts, a challenge to a knowledge claim based on the possibility that we are dreaming would be taken as ludicrous — as not at all relevant to the question of whether we know. As long as there is no special reason to think that you are dreaming or seeing a cleverly disguised mule, there is no requirement that you be able to rule out such a possibility. In effect, the response is that the skeptic assesses ordinary knowledge claims according to standards that are stricter than the ones that actually govern the correct use of the expression "to know". Thus the skeptic is simply mistaken when he claims that our ordinary knowledge attributions are incorrect.

Essentially, this response to skepticism underscores the rules that govern our ordinary use of the verb "to know". The skeptic is accused of objecting to knowledge attributions that are perfectly appropriate according to the rules that govern such attributions. That is, the fact that we ordinarily attribute knowledge over a wide range of cases even though the skeptic's standards are not met is alleged to show that the standards the skeptic is insisting upon are stricter than the ones we ordinarily require for a belief to be an instance of knowledge. But to deny that any beliefs are instances of knowledge on the grounds that there are no beliefs that meet the skeptic's excessively strict standards would be akin, e.g., to denying that there are no physicians in New York on the grounds that there are no persons in New York who can cure any disease in twenty minutes.⁵ As such, the skeptic can be accused of distorting the concept of knowledge to the point that his claims are no longer applicable to what we are claiming when we say that we know. At best he can be seen as proposing that we change the rules that govern such attributions — a proposal we may simply reject.

Unfortunately this type of response to skepticism oversimplifies matters. For one must pay attention to the distinction between appropriately applying an expression and truthfully applying that expression. Barry Stroud has recently argued this way against this appeal to ordinary language.⁶ He discusses a case (which he attributes to Thompson Clarke⁷) in which airplane spotters are trained by their military manuals to perform the important task of distinguishing between planes of type *E* and planes of type *F*. The manuals tell them that planes which have features *xyw* are *E*'s and planes that have features *xyz* are *F*'s. It turns out that there are also a few planes of type *G* indistinguishable from *F*'s which also have *xyz*. The manuals do not mention them because it is not important that the spotters be able to distinguish between *F*'s and *G*'s.

Under these conditions, it will be perfectly appropriate for one of the spotters who gets a good look at a plane with *xyz* to claim that he knows that it is an *F*. According to the rules for identifying planes, as specified in the manual, his claim would be completely justified. But clearly, because of the few *G*'s that are around the spotter does not know that it is an *F*, even if it is an *F*. A spotter cannot know that a plane which has *xyz* is an *F* even if it is an *F*, unless he can rule out the possibility that it is a *G*. What this example shows is that it may be perfectly appropriate for someone to claim that he knows even though in fact he does not know. That is, the use of an expression may be perfectly appropriate given the rules that govern its application and yet it still be the case that the proposition expressed is false. Of course the speaker cannot be blamed for his use of the expression, but that does not mean that what he said cannot be false.

Stroud wants to assimilate the position of an airplane spotter to that of a speaker who in everyday life claims to know certain ordinary propositions. The rules that govern

the ordinary application of the expression "to know" permit us to say in a range of circumstances that we know certain things on the basis of our perceptual evidence. It is appropriate for us to say this even though there are alternatives to what we claim to know. The ordinary standards that govern the use of the expression "to know" do not require that we be able to rule out the possibility that we are confronted with an alternative of the kind referred to by the skeptic. However this is consistent with it still being the case that we in fact fail to know — that our attributions of knowledge are false — due to the fact that we cannot rule out such possibilities.

As Stroud describes this case, he does not clearly distinguish between two features of the circumstances that could explain why, despite their falsity, attributions of knowledge to the spotters can still be appropriate. The first is that the spotters are unaware of the existence of *G*'s and so it can still be appropriate for them to attribute knowledge to themselves. Because the manual tells them that the planes with *xyz* are *F*'s they are justified in claiming to know that the planes are *F*'s. Moreover, anyone who reads the training manual and is unaware of the omission would be justified in claiming that someone who sees a plane with *xyz* knows that it is an *F* (provided of course that the attributor does not have access to additional information which renders the justification of the spotter defective.) In this sense, given the rules that govern knowledge attributions, it can be appropriate to say that *S* knows even though it is false that *S* knows. On this way of looking at matters, our everyday knowledge attributions would involve a kind of mistake — a mistake for which we can not be faulted, but a mistake nonetheless.

There is another aspect of the case that suggests that it is not so much that our everyday knowledge attributions involve a mistake, but rather that they perpetuate a kind of useful fiction. As Stroud describes the case, it is very useful to the war effort to distinguish between the case where a spotter identifies a plane as an *F* on the basis of observing that it is *xyz* and the case where a spotter makes the identification on the basis of observing merely that it is *xy*. In the latter case, there is no basis for thinking it is an *F* rather than an *E*. In the former case there is a very good basis for thinking that the plane is an *F* rather than an *E* (and there is no harm in the chance of misidentifying an *F* as a *G*). This is precisely the reason that it could be appropriate even for someone who knows of the existence of the *G*'s to claim that a spotter in the former case knows that the plane is an *F* whereas it would not be appropriate in the latter case. It is appropriate in the former case to speak in this way even though what is said is literally false because speaking in this way marks a useful distinction and thereby subserves the war effort.

Both of these considerations could be said to apply to situations in which an attribution of knowledge might be false although perfectly appropriate given the rules of the language. Can either of them be used to undermine the Austin-style ordinary language response to skepticism? Of course they both illustrate that there can be no inference from the fact that the rules of the language license an attribution of knowledge to the conclusion that such an attribution is true. It can be appropriate to say that someone knows even when what is said is false. Surely that in itself is not surprising. But while some anti-skeptical appeals to our everyday pattern of knowledge attributions may seem to rely on this facile inference, in general they need not.

Let us look at each of the considerations: The first is that one can appropriately attribute knowledge to oneself even when the attribution is false because one might have every reason to think that it is true. As weak a point as this is, it can still be used to

undermine what was sometimes called the paradigm case argument. This argument proceeds by claiming that certain expressions can only be learned ostensively — by being shown certain cases where the term applies. It is alleged to follow that it could not meaningfully be denied that the expression applies in such cases. Anyone who questions the correctness of applying such terms in these paradigm cases shows that they have not grasped the conditions under which the term may be applied — they simply do not understand the meaning of the word. This has been held to be true for epistemic expressions like "it is certain that..."⁸ According to the argument, it would follow that this expression can not meaningfully be said not to apply to those paradigm instances that are used to convey the meaning of the expression. So any skeptic who claims that nothing is certain must be confused about the meaning of "it is certain that..."

However, once we see that it does not follow from the fact that an expression is applied appropriately that it is applied truly, we can see that the paradigm case argument fails.⁹ Consider an expression like "...is a miracle." In a society that firmly believes in miracles, the meaning of that expression might be taught ostensively — by having certain paradigm cases pointed out, such as a sudden and unexpected recovery from an illness, a narrow escape from an accident, etc. Someone who is brought up in such a society could be justified in believing that these events are instances of miracles and, as such, it would be perfectly appropriate for him to say that these events are miracles. Someone who denied that they were miracles might be accused of not knowing the meaning of the expression "... is a miracle." However the application of the expression to the "paradigm cases" is conditioned on the reasonable (given what the authorities of this society claim) belief that the cases fit a certain criterion, viz., being caused by supernatural intervention. Since presumably the belief that the cases fit the criterion is mistaken, the claim that the events are miraculous, while appropriate given the circumstances, is false.

Analogously while it may be true in the case of an expression like "it is certain that...", that it is taught by ostension, it could also be true that the word is applied in those cases in virtue of a reasonable belief on the part of the attributors that the cases meet a certain criterion, viz., that all alternatives are eliminated.¹⁰ So while it may be appropriate to say of beliefs like "This is a hand" that they are certain, what the skeptic calls to our attention is the falsity of our belief that these paradigm cases fit the criterion and thus to the falsity of our belief that the term "certain" applies.

So, a simple appeal to paradigm instances of application cannot undermine skeptical arguments. An attribution of knowledge that may be perfectly appropriate from the perspective of ordinary language could nonetheless turn out to be false. The sense of "appropriate" here is that such attributions may be justified for the attributor, i.e., the attributor can not be faulted.

While this kind of appeal to paradigm instances may fail for this reason, the defender of common sense can claim that the case of knowledge attributions is unlike the case of miracle attributions in a crucial respect. In the latter case, once it is conceded that the "paradigm" cases do not involve supernatural intervention, the speakers in question would presumably readily withdraw their attributions. They would agree that the cases fail to meet a necessary condition for being a miracle. But this is not necessarily true in the case of knowledge. We find it very paradoxical to concede that we fail to know anything even after the skeptic calls our attention to the skeptical alternatives. This is not to say that we do not feel the pull of the skeptical argument. The point is that we still

feel the intuitive pull of saying that we know things. But unlike what would presumably be true in the miracles case, we do not, in general, simply concede the skeptical claim that our everyday knowledge attributions are false. So, the skeptic can not accuse one who appeals to our ordinary knowledge attributions of simply failing to see that an attribution can be appropriate (in the sense that the attributor is free of blame in making the attribution), while nonetheless being false.

Now the skeptic could try to dismiss the significance of our reluctance to concede the falsity of our everyday attributions by claiming that it simply reveals that our old habits are not easily shed. This persistence of our habitual ways of thinking about knowledge even after we have been confronted with skeptical arguments was noticed by Descartes ("...so insensibly of my own accord I fall back into my former opinions...")¹¹ and by Hume ("Nature will always maintain her rights and prevail in the end over any abstract reasoning whatsoever.")¹²

But the defender of common sense is not merely pointing out the persistence of our habitual pattern of knowledge attribution. This phenomenon would show nothing regarding the validity of the skeptical argument. What does have significance for the skeptical arguments is the fact that there are times when we find our everyday pattern of knowledge attribution compelling even while we are in the midst of sincere philosophical reflection. The fact is that when we think about skeptical arguments, we often find ourselves pulled in two directions. Often we vacillate between skepticism and common sense. So it is not just that we find that after we are confronted with skeptical arguments we continue, habitually, to attribute knowledge in our day to day lives. Rather we feel the intuitive pull of common sense even while we are considering the skeptical argument. This latter phenomenon can not be attributed merely to a kind of insensible habit.

Of course the fact that the skeptical conclusion is resisted by us does not show that the skeptic is wrong. The point is that contrary to what Stroud and others seem in part to be claiming, the appeal to our everyday knowledge attributions cannot be so easily dismissed. For these attributions can be seen as reflecting deep-seated intuitions about the concept of knowledge. Since our intuitions are a kind of data that theories of knowledge must explain, they present a formidable challenge to the skeptical position. The relation between our everyday attributions and skeptical arguments is more complex than the reply to the paradigm case argument presupposes.

There is, however, another strategy available to the skeptic that allows for an explanation of the intuitive appeal of our everyday knowledge attributions while still preserving the skeptical position that these attributions are always incorrect. As was illustrated in the spoiler case, there is another way in which an attribution of knowledge could be appropriate without being true, a way that could explain the appeal of our everyday attributions even to someone who is aware of the skeptical alternatives. We noted that there is a sense in which it could still be appropriate to claim to know that a plane with characteristics *xyz* is an *F* even for someone who knows of the existence of *G*'s (planes that are also *xyz* and indistinguishable from *F*'s.) Even though strictly speaking such a person does not know that planes which are *xyz* are *F*'s, there is still value in distinguishing between cases in which someone claims that a plane is an *F* on the basis of its being *xyz* and cases where the same claim is made on a weaker basis, e.g., a plane being merely *xy*. To say that in the former case that the spoiler knows that it is an *F* whereas in the latter case he does not, serves to mark this important distinction even though

strictly speaking, he does not know in either case that it is an *F*. If we were to speak strictly, we would lose this important distinction. We would have to say in every case that the spotter fails to know that he sees an *F*. By saying that he knows in the case where he observes that the plane is *xyz*, we enable ourselves to distinguish those cases that are important, even though we do so by saying something literally false. This is the sense in which it may be appropriate to say that one knows that he sees an *F* even for someone who knows of the existence of *G*'s.

The skeptic could then try to assimilate our position in everyday life to the situation of the spotter in this respect. Whereas the existence of alternatives like dreaming make it literally false that we ever know anything, nonetheless it is useful to distinguish between those cases in which we can eliminate all but the skeptical alternatives and those cases in which we can not even do this. Our ordinary use of the expression "to know" serves to mark this distinction and so is of considerable practical value. The former cases (where we can eliminate all but the skeptical alternatives) are, for all practical purposes, close enough to being instances of knowledge to make it appropriate to say that the person knows. In this way, our everyday attributions of knowledge could be considered appropriate even though strictly speaking they would always be false.¹³ In the latter cases, where there are ordinary (non-skeptical) alternatives that we can not eliminate, it would not even be appropriate to say (whether correctly or not) that we know.

This pragmatic view of the role of our everyday knowledge attributions would appear to undermine their significance for skeptical arguments. It also has the advantage for the skeptic that it accounts for the intuitive appeal of our ordinary knowledge attributions, thereby avoiding the accusation that the skeptic ignores our everyday practices. Moreover, the skeptic can accuse his critic of failing to account for the appeal of skeptical arguments. For, if our everyday knowledge attributions demonstrate that the standards for knowledge are not as high as the skeptic claims, then why do skeptical arguments have any appeal to begin with? While it is true that we sometimes react to skepticism as if were preposterous, it is nonetheless true that we are often deeply troubled by the apparent threat posed by skeptical arguments. Just as the skeptic is required to explain why, if his view is correct, we find our everyday knowledge attributions so intuitively appealing, so the anti-skeptic is required to explain why, if the skeptic is wrong about those attributions, skeptical arguments appear so powerful.

Fortunately, the defender of common sense can avoid the pragmatic view and still explain the appeal of skeptical arguments by treating "knowledge" as having an indexical semantics. This would allow us to reinterpret the significance of our everyday pattern of attributing knowledge — the difference in the way we view the ordinary cases of inadequate evidence and those cases where the only uneliminated alternatives are the skeptical ones. Whereas the skeptic claims that this difference reflects the fact that under certain conditions, attributions of knowledge can be appropriate (although false), one could claim instead that it reflects the fact that in certain contexts, attributions of knowledge can be true, in less than ideal conditions. The appeal of skeptical arguments shows that there are other contexts in which similar knowledge attributions are false. By viewing "knowledge" as an indexical term, we can take our everyday attributions at face value while still giving skeptical arguments their due.¹⁴ In everyday contexts of attribution, the standards for the truth of a knowledge attribution are such that we can truly ascribe knowledge to ourselves. This is not to deny that our standards can sometimes shift and

become stricter. Skeptical arguments are effective precisely because they can have this effect on us. But the standards, once shifted, can also shift back. This explains our tendency, when confronted with skeptical arguments, to vacillate over whether we know.¹⁵

On this view, both our everyday claims that we know and the skeptic's claims that we fail to know can be correct. The fact that this is the case should be no more mysterious than the fact that the same surface can be truly described as flat or as not flat depending on the context in which the question is considered. There is still another alternative available to the anti-skeptic that is less charitable to the skeptic than the indexicality view.¹⁶ This view draws an analogy between the skepticism controversy and the controversy that occurred in the first half of this century over whether physics had shown that no ordinary objects are solid. The issue concerned whether it is true that physics in discovering the atomic structure of matter, thereby demonstrating that ordinary objects contain "spaces", had shown that those objects are in fact not solid. The opposing view claimed that all that physics has shown was that, contrary to what we had believed, solid objects do contain "spaces". The resolution of this dispute hinges on subtle issues concerning the modal status of the claim that solid objects contain no spaces. The defender of the view that the solidity of ordinary objects is not threatened by physics would have to view it as a contingent claim that we had mistakenly believed to be true.

Analogously, the defender of common sense against the skeptic could hold that the same is true of the claim that our evidence in everyday cases where we attribute knowledge eliminates all the alternatives. On this view, what the skeptic has shown is not that there are no cases of knowledge but rather that our ordinary cases of knowledge are not based on as strong evidence as we thought they were. Just as physics has taught us that something we believed about solid objects is not true (that they contain no spaces), so skepticism has taught us that something we believed about our evidence in ordinary cases of knowledge is not true, viz., that it eliminates all the alternatives. The persisting appeal of skeptical arguments is to be explained analogously to the way that we might explain the persisting appeal (if there is any) of the claim that there are no solid objects — our lack of clarity over the modal status of the claim that knowledge requires evidence that eliminates all alternatives.

At this point it should be clear that the issues concerning the relationship between skepticism and everyday life are quite complex. While the defender of common sense cannot simply appeal to our everyday attributions as demonstrating that the skeptic is somehow confused about the meaning of "to know" or (equivalently) about the nature of the concept of knowledge, the skeptic can not simply accuse common sense of making a straightforward mistake. Both of these views fail to do justice to the other side.

Where does this leave us? It seems to me that what we are confronting is a burden of proof issue. Both sides of the dispute can find a way to view matters that favors their position. In this situation, it would seem that the side that has the burden of proof has to show that its way of construing matters is the correct way. One might think that this is not the case — that in fact the situation as I have described it favors the skeptic. For the fact that there are competing ways of construing the situation, one that entails skepticism and one that entails common sense, suggests that there is a standoff. And a standoff favors the skeptic. For if the skeptic has succeeded in arguing us into a stand-

off, then he has succeeded in undermining our right to continue to claim that we know. Until skepticism is refuted we cannot claim to know that we in fact know.

But why should the skeptic win a standoff? The situation seems to be that neither side can prove its case to the other. But this situation will favor whoever does not have the burden of proof. To say that the standoff favors the skeptic presupposes that we have the burden of proving to the skeptic that we know, — if we can not demonstrate to the skeptic that we know, then we can not claim to know. But, if the burden is on the skeptic to prove his case to us, then the fact that neither side can demonstrate its case to the other will favor common sense.

So what we need to consider is where the burden of proof lies. It seems to me that we (the non-skeptics) should view the burden of proof as lying with the skeptic. After all, the skeptic makes a claim that strikes us as intuitively outrageous. He claims that all of our everyday knowledge attributions are false — that all along when we have been saying things like, "I know what time it is," and "She knows the population of Los Angeles", we have been saying things that are literally false. Surely we should not accept such an incredible claim unless we are forced to. That is to say, it would not be rational to accept such a claim unless we were forced to. And as we have seen, we are not forced to. While the skeptic presents us with an account of our practices according to which our everyday attributions of knowledge are false, we do not have to accept that account, because we can provide a competing account according to which our knowledge attributions are true. The very fact that our account allows us to avoid the outrageous consequences of the skeptic's account constitutes a rational basis for accepting it. It does not seem to me to be a condition of our accepting an account that renders our knowledge attributions as true that we be able to show independently that the skeptic's account is incorrect. We should view the burden as being on the skeptic to demonstrate to us why we must accept his account. This would require the skeptic to show that our account is incorrect. And he does not achieve that simply by pointing out that there is an alternative account.

This is not to say that the skeptic should necessarily agree with us about where the burden of proof lies. On his view, we may be required to demonstrate to him that we do know. This would require us to show that the skeptic's account is incorrect. And, of course, we would not achieve that simply by pointing out that there is an alternative account. Where fundamental intuitions are involved, it may be impossible for either side to demonstrate the correctness of its position to the other. But that is no reason for either side to abandon its position. So for those of us who find our everyday knowledge attributions intuitively compelling, there is no reason that I can see to become skeptics.

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NOTES

- 1 There are different things that could be meant by "eliminate" here. On one view an alternative is eliminated just in case it is inconsistent with the evidence. A weaker view would require only that an eliminated alternative must be known to be false. Nothing I say will presuppose either of these interpretations.
- 2 Fred Dretske, "Epistemic Operators" *Journal of Philosophy*, (Dec. 1970)
- 3 Barry Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism* (Oxford, 1974)
- 4 J. L. Austin, "Other Minds" *Philosophical Papers*, (Oxford, 1970)
- 5 Paul Edwards, "Bertrand Russell's Doubts About Induction", in *Logic and Language*, A. Flew (ed.), (Oxford, 1955)
- 6 Stroud, *op.cit.*, p. 57, also see John Passmore, "Arguments to Meaninglessness: Excluded Opposites and Paradigm Cases" in *Philosophical Reasoning*, (New York, London, 1961)
- 7 "The Legacy of Skepticism", *Journal of Philosophy*, 1972
- 8 Norman Malcolm, "Moore and Ordinary Language", in *The Philosophy of G.E. Moore*, ed. Paul A. Schilpp, (Evanston and Chicago, 1942)
- 9 The argument and the example that follow are from Passmore, *op. cit.*
- 10 I assume that, at least prior to an encounter with skeptical arguments, a belief to this effect would be reasonable.
- 11 See the end of Meditation I in *Meditations on First Philosophy*.
- 12 Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, section 5
- 13 This view is discussed by Peter Unger in *Philosophical Relativity*, (Minneapolis, 1984)
- 14 I defend a view of this kind in "How to be a Fallibilist" in *Philosophical Perspectives*, 2, *Epistemology*, 1988, (J. Tomberlin, ed.); also see Fred Dretske, "The Pragmatic Dimension of Knowledge", *Philosophical Studies*, 40 (1981); G. C. Sime, "Skepticism, Relevant Alternatives, and Deductive Closure", *Philosophical Studies*, 29 (1976); and David Lewis, "Scorekeeping in a Language Game", *Journal of Philosophical Logic*, 8, (1979)
- 15 Since on this view, knowledge is an indexical, these points should really be expressed metalinguistically, viz., the sentence "S knows *p*" can be true in one context and false in another. For stylistic reasons, I will not use the metalinguistic formulations. For a more precise account of how this works see "How to be a Fallibilist", *ibid.* Peter Unger, *op. cit.*, argues that there is no basis for choosing between this view and what I have called, the pragmatic view urged by the skeptic.
- 16 I am indebted here to conversations with Nathan Salmon

