Handout 13

Hinges and common sense: Wright

Remark 1. I'll use 'BIV' both as a noun and as a verb, analogously to 'dream'.

PRELIMINARY REMARKS Sceptical arguments introduce a large, purportedly untestable possibility `61` (e.g., dreaming, being a BIV, or the non-existence of the material world) intended to undermine assumed knowledge. The sceptic must do more than claim these possibilities cannot be conclusively refuted; they must undermine the thought that the balance of evidence is against them. `62`

RADICAL SCEPTICISM (BIV). This 'first' sceptical argument targets sceptical possibilities that `63` preclude the acquisition of perceptually based knowledge or reasonable belief, not by clashing with the claim's truth, but because the state itself, like BIVing, vitiates perception.

It targets propositions (*P*) that an agent (*X*) could only acquire a sufficient reason to believe at time *t* by perceiving at *t*:

(13-1) Premiss *A*: If *X* is BIVing at *t*, then *X* does not have a sufficient reason to believe *P* at *t*.

The argument relies on two principles of reasonable belief:

(13-2) (i) Transmissibility: To have sufficient reason to believe both an entailment and its premises is to have sufficient reason to believe its conclusion (necessary for valid inference to be used for rational persuasion).

(ii) Iterativity: Whenever there is sufficient reason to believe *P*, sufficient reason is available to believe that there is sufficient reason to believe *P* (holds if possessing sufficient reason is a decidable state of affairs—for else it's not implementable).

A, (i), (ii) together yield:

(13-3) Intermediate conclusion *B*: If I have sufficient reason to believe *P* at *t*, I have sufficient reason (at *t*) to believe that I am not BIVing at *t*.

Now, the sceptic must establish:

(13-4) Premiss *C*: At no time *t* do I have sufficient reason to believe that I am not dreaming at *t*. `64`

Descartes' argument for *C* is this: I can't have an empirical reason to believe that I am not BIVing, `64` since to have such a reason, I need first a sufficient reason to believe I did not BIV that empirical procedure. That is, I first need an empirical reason to believe that that procedure was not a mere representation/hologram in my brain. Since the belief that I am not BIVing can't be a priori, either, I can't have a sufficient reason for it at all. If *C* is granted, it follows by contraposition of *B* that I never have sufficient reason to believe *P*:

(13-5) (i) For every *t*, I have no sufficient reason to believe that I am not BIVing at *t*. [*C*]
(ii) If I have no sufficient reason (at *t*) to believe that I am not BIVing at *t*, then I have no sufficient reason to believe *P* at *t*. [Contraposition of *B*: $p \supset q \Leftrightarrow \sim q \supset \sim p$]
(iii) For every *t*, I have no sufficient reason to believe *P* at *t*. [*modus ponens*]

LIBERAL SCEPTICISM (MOOREAN BLUES). This 'second' argument concerns possibilities inconsistent with knowledge claims (e.g., existence of other minds, existence of the material/external world). I focus here on the putative inadequacy of Moore's proof of the external world. `65`

As we saw, Moore presented his argument thus:

(13-6) (II) I know I have a hand (while holding it in front of my face in normal conditions).
(III) Therefore, I know that there is an external world (since a hand is a material object, existing in space, etc.).

We may isolate the following response to Moore: `65`

Petitio principii response: You can't just begin with (II)! The transition from (II) to (III) is only plausible if you have ruled out sceptical possibilities—which you haven't done.

Question 2. Give other examples of the *petitio principii* fallacy.

Moore's reply is a familiar one. Ruling out those possibilities is far less credible than my judgement (II). But is this any good? Moore seems to be saying that we shouldn't challenge our deep convictions, and that's simply 'unphilosophical'.

Remark 3. A sophisticated version of this response is in Thompson Clarke classic paper 'The legacy of skepticism'.

Wright suggests a different route. The premiss (II) is not a primitive given fact (=not a Moorean fact!). It follows from another, suppressed premiss:

(13-7) (I) A complex description of Moore's total experience: 'I'm lifting my hand, I am looking in the direction where I expect my hand to be, I see my hand, I am saying, "This is my hand", ...'

The JP (II) is not primitive, because (I) provides *evidence* for (II). Then we expect that it will also count as evidence for (III). For if it doesn't, why believe (III) anyway?

But this natural expectation is wrong: it should make us misunderstand the (I)-(II)-(III) logical relation. Consider first the belladonna analogue:

(13-8) (I) This fox has rabies, I was bitten by this fox, I am not inoculated against rabies etc.
 (II) I have lyssavirus in my blood.
 (III) I am highly likely to die in a matter of days.

Here, (I) describes a body of evidence that supports (II). And in this case, evidence transmits across entailment: since (II) entails (III), (I) also supports (III).

But the situation is very different in other cases. Consider:

(13-9) (I) I have put 'X' on a sheet of paper that says, 'Election slip' etc.
 (II) I have voted.
 (III) An election is taking place.

Here, I must *first* accept (III) in order for the premiss (I) to count *as* evidence for (II). And of course, no number of people scribbling 'X' on pieces of paper would confirm that an election is taking place.

To return to Moore's (13-6), (III) must first be 'seriously entertained' for my (I)-experiences codified in (13-7) to confirm the JP (II). Hence the *petitio principii* complaint is still alive.

There is another worry, too. For if the indirect evidence for (III) that follows the (I)–(II) pattern is ruled out, and if there is no obvious way to collect direct evidence for (III), whatever this means, then (III) seems to be beyond all evidence altogether. And doesn't this naturally lead to scepticism? In particular:

(13-10) (*a*) All evidence (=I-propositions) for common sense II-propositions depends on the prior accepting of III-propositions.
 (*b*) III-propositions cannot be justified by I/II evidence (they can't be presupposed in their own justification.
 (*c*) They cannot be justified any other way (=no direct evidence).
 (*d*) III-propositions may be false.

RADICAL SOLIPSISM. Scepticism entails a 'solipsism of the present moment'. If I have no reasonable support for II-propositions, what *do* I have support for? Presumably I am left with an inchoate group of I-propositions. These are nothing but reports (well, 'reports'!) of the kaleidoscope of my states of consciousness. Note that we got to this point w/o assuming any fancy-pancy scenario of demons, BIVs, Matrix etc.

Wright sketches six ways of dealing with this conclusion suggested in the earlier literature. I want only to mention these:

(13-11) PL argument: Merely restates the absurdity of the solipsistic language.

Conventionalism: The (I)-(II) transition is conventional, not evidential. (Lewis, Carnap ...)

Direct apprehension: In perceiving your contorted face I directly see your *pain*. In perceiving my hand I directly see a material object. (Moore?, McDowell)

HINGES AND CERTAINTY. We distinguish between:

(13-12) Knowledge: A form of effortful cognitive achievement.

Certainty: An immediate, unearned epistemic attitude: does Moore, for example, deserve a medal for knowing that this is his hand? and what effort should be made to know that there are material objects at all? For all of that, we are 'entitled' to regard these propositions as certain.

YSB