

Bryan Frances, Scepticism Comes Alive

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According to the classic sceptical argument, if S is to have knowledge of P, for any P, then S must rule out everything which is inconsistent with her knowing P. There are some scenarios, the so-called “sceptical hypotheses” (e.g. that S is a brain in a vat, that an evil demon is deceiving her, that she is dreaming, etc.), which are obviously inconsistent with S’s knowing P, and which she cannot rule out. Hence, S does not know P, for any P. As a way out of the sceptical trap, epistemologists have adopted a number of strategies in recent years (contextualism, the relevant alternatives approach, denial of closure, and so on). In this book, Bryan Frances proposes a new sceptical argument, and maintains that it is more convincing and radical than the traditional one.

The new argument is based on several simple points. The most important one is the replacement of the wild and outrageous classic sceptical hypothesis with a “live hypothesis”; that is, a live socio-epistemic possibility which has been evaluated for many years by well-informed and well-respected experts who deem it true, or about as likely as any other relevant hypothesis, and who have reached their opinion about it in an epistemically responsible way, backed up by decent evidence. There are some other crucial notions concerning S’s attitude towards a live sceptical hypothesis, which are lacking in the classic sceptical argument. Thus, S is “a mere mortal” with respect to the live hypothesis if she is aware of it and its live status and of the fact that it is inconsistent with the allegedly known P. She may be called an expert with regard to the hypothesis, albeit an expert not much better than those who insist that it is true or could be true. In addition, we are to suppose that a live sceptical hypothesis thus understood is not ruled out for S, which means, roughly, the following: given S’s abilities and expertise, she is unable to rule it out herself, and no one has ruled it out and somehow transferred its ruled-out status to her (for details, see pp. 18–23).

To see how these conditions work in a particular case, let us consider Frances’ example. Suppose that S came to believe, by attending a palaeontology class, reading books, and so forth, that the dinosaurs were wiped out by a huge meteorite, and suppose in addition that her belief is true. There are two other relevant hypotheses about the demise of dinosaurs – the supervolcano hypothesis and the solar flare hypothesis – which may be called live in the relevant sense: they are advocated by a number of respected scientists who have solid evidence for them, who have written important

books and articles devoted to them, and who are taken very seriously in the scientific community. If S is aware of the respected status of the rival hypotheses but is unable to defeat them, and if she is also aware of the fact that they are inconsistent with her knowledge that a huge meteorite wiped out the dinosaurs, then she does not know that a huge meteorite wiped out the dinosaurs, even if this theory is, in fact, true. Because of the presence of live hypotheses and S's status as a mere mortal with regard to them, her true belief is not warranted enough to be called knowledge.

To put it in more general terms, the template for the new sceptical argument may be presented as follows: (i) if S is mortal, then a live hypothesis is not ruled out; (ii) if S is mortal and a live hypothesis is not ruled out, then S does not know P; (iii) thus, if S is mortal, then S does not know P; (iv) many members of our epistemic community are mortals; (v) hence, many members of our epistemic community do not know P.

It may be thought that the new sceptical argument concerns a limited range of beliefs – our beliefs in scientific propositions, as in the meteorite example – and has a narrow application, as opposed to classical scepticism, whose conclusions are fairly radical. Frances, however, argues that the new sceptical argument can be used to generate conclusions that are no less radical, though in some respects restricted, if relevant live hypotheses are plugged into it. One such hypothesis is eliminativism in the philosophy of mind.

The eliminativist hypothesis may be taken to consist of two parts. First, it says that even though we have many cognitive states, none of them counts as a propositional belief; in other words, “S believes P” is false. Second, it assumes that propositional knowledge requires propositional belief or acceptance, i.e. that if “S knows P” is true, then “S believes (or accepts) P” is also true (p. 32). The eliminativist hypothesis is obviously live: it is regarded as true, or about as likely as many rival hypotheses, by a number of respected philosophers and cognitive scientists. Even supposing that eliminativism is not live at present, it is quite conceivable that it will become live in the near future, or that it is live in some close possible world. It does not matter for the new sceptic whether the eliminativist hypothesis is true; he can assume (as Frances does) that it is false, since the only relevant thing is whether it is a live possibility. As is easily seen from the template, a live sceptical hypothesis is not taken as a premise of the argument. Furthermore, many members of our intellectual community are mere mortals regarding the eliminativist hypothesis, for it has not been defeated definitively. It is true that one may point to some excellent refutations of eliminativism in books and articles, but it is also true that no one can assert that it has been definitively refuted once and for all. Hence, if we admit that the eliminativist hypothesis is live, and if P in the sceptical

argument template is a claim in the form “R believes Q”, then the conclusion is that mere mortals in our intellectual community – those who are aware of the liveness of the eliminativist hypothesis and its inconsistency with the truth of “R believes Q” – do not know that R believes Q or, in general, that anyone believes anything.

There are some other interesting live hypotheses that can be inserted into the template. Frances considers colour error theory (no ordinary physical object really is coloured), character traits error theory (there are no robust character traits), and error theory on pain location (pain occurs only in the brain, not in other parts of the body). These also lead to radical conclusions: with regard to them, a mere mortal does not know that his socks are blue, that his friend is a kind person, or that he has a pain in his chest.

This is, very roughly, the basic argument for a new scepticism that Frances develops in this book. He patiently and skilfully argues that it is more persuasive than the traditional one, and that it poses a much more significant epistemic threat. This follows from the liveness of the new sceptical hypotheses. While the traditional hypotheses are usually taken very seriously, it is not because they are seen as true, but only because they are seen as insufficiently neutralized. This is why they cannot be live possibilities and, consequently, are not as threatening as them. Comparing how a live hypothesis, like the supervolcano one, and a traditional hypothesis, like the “brain in a vat” one, threaten the truth of the claim “S knows that a meteorite wiped out the dinosaurs”, Frances shows that while the former hypothesis generates no less than twenty-seven weapons to defeat this claim, the latter generates only six (pp. 125–127).

Frances also discusses various anti-sceptical strategies, and classifies them into three groups: (1) the No-Threat Strategy (which comes in eight varieties), according to which the live sceptical hypotheses present no threat at all; (2) the Disarmed-Threat Strategy (in two varieties), which says that sceptical hypotheses can be set aside as irrelevant; and (3) the Defeated-Threat Strategy (in three varieties), which says that the live sceptic can be defeated head-on, as it were. Frances tries to show that even if these strategies may work against the traditional sceptic, they do not work against the live sceptic. He concludes, among other things, as follows:

[T]he arguments for, and particulars of, live scepticism are of significant philosophical interest even if they don't change the way we construct theories of knowledge and warrant. [...] There is something simple, clean, hypnotizing, and beautiful about the classic arguments for radical scepticism. They can mesmerize just about anyone, regardless of philosophical or scientific background. To a certain extent, they keep philosophers employed. The arguments for live scepticism may never be simple, clean, hypnotizing, or

beautiful; they will never constitute a jobs programme for philosophers. But they do make us view scepticism with new eyes. (p. 203)

I think that we can agree with Frances that what he presents in this book is a new argument for a new kind of radical scepticism. While one will undoubtedly notice similarities with some other current theories, esp. contextualism and relevant alternatives theories, Frances is eager to point out some important differences. For instance, it might be thought that his story of live hypotheses is nothing but a story of relevant alternatives, for in both cases the idea is that if one believes P, and Q is a relevant alternative to P, then one must rule out Q in order to know P. Obviously, however, a relevant alternative need not be live in Frances' sense, while, on the other hand, every hypothesis which satisfies the liveness conditions may count as a relevant alternative (see p. 24; for contextualism, see esp. pp. 144–152). I think we can also detect some similarities with another form of classical scepticism, i.e. Pyrrhonism. Setting aside all the obvious differences, the Pyrrhonists also maintain that the warrant of our beliefs is not threatened by some outrageous and insane hypothesis, but rather by disagreement, which is an inevitable result of philosophical and scientific practice. Even though the Pyrrhonists speak of the “equal force” of inconsistent hypotheses, they do not mean that such hypotheses must be weighed equally: a single dissenting opinion, provided that it is well argued, can sabotage our knowledge (or belief, as they would say), just as, in Frances' case, a live hypothesis need not be endorsed by a majority.

Frances claims that he is not a live sceptic: “I’m the sceptic’s lawyer, prosecuting knowledge and defending the importance of the live sceptical arguments” (p. 34). While I do not understand his reasons for saying so (perhaps “I’m anti-sceptical by nature” (p. x) is a sufficient justification), I think we can agree with him that even if his arguments for scepticism fail, we are left with some interesting results. First, note that live scepticism, as opposed to the traditional sort, is not a negative and permanent epistemic predicament of which we all are victims. It applies only to a certain group of people in certain periods of their lives, i.e. to those of us who are mere mortals with regard to a live hypothesis. Thus, it is only a mere mortal with regard to the colour error theory who does not know that his socks are blue; a non-mortal, e.g. a child, or anyone else not acquainted with the theory, still possesses that knowledge. Since the liveness of the hypotheses is a sociological fact, the hypotheses need not be true, and our awareness of them and their liveness results from our being members of a certain epistemic community. This new scepticism warns us that, just as there are other important things which we inherit from our epistemic communities (e.g. knowledge), the loss of knowledge may also be among them. In that

sense, the new scepticism may be seen as an important contribution to social epistemology. Furthermore, even though mere mortals do not possess the knowledge that non-mortals do, they are better off epistemically: while a non-mortal knows that his socks are blue, or that he believes his socks are blue, a mortal does not know this. And yet the latter is epistemically superior to the former: “People unacquainted with philosophy or colour science or cognitive science may know more than we do, but this just shows that we need a new and improved measure of epistemic standing” (p. 82). This may provoke some further questions about the relationship between luck and epistemic virtue. For it turns out that both the mortal’s and the non-mortal’s epistemic standing is heavily influenced by luck: since it is a matter of accident that they find themselves in their respective epistemic communities, both the fact that the mortal does not know and the fact that the non-mortal knows are, in a sense, a matter of luck.

Finally, there is the question of the power of philosophy. Frances insists that live hypotheses should have both philosophical and scientific support. He is, however, reluctant to admit a purely philosophical hypothesis into his argument, and works only with hypotheses that have scientific credentials. This, I believe, is a wise choice – not because of the alleged powerlessness of philosophy (Frances protests against such a view), but because if he admitted hypotheses like “No one is free”, “Murder is not morally prohibited”, and the like (Frances’s examples, p. 158), then he would have to substantially revise the criteria for liveness, which might, in turn, threaten to blur the border between live and traditional scepticism.

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