

Epistemic Scepticism, Ethical Relativism, and the Soundness of Their Arguments

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ABSTRACT

The article aims to analyse the relationship between premises and conclusions in some sceptical arguments concerning empirical knowledge of the external world and in some relativistic arguments concerning ethical values. In the first place, the concepts of scepticism and relativism are re-defined; in the second place, the soundness of each argument is examined. For both sceptical and relativistic arguments, the paper aims to show the relevance of the distinction between a priori reasoning and a posteriori reasoning.

L'articolo intende analizzare il rapporto tra premesse e conclusioni in alcuni argomenti scettici concernenti la conoscenza empirica del mondo esterno e in alcuni argomenti relativistici concernenti i valori etici. In primo luogo, vengono ridefiniti i concetti di scetticismo e relativismo; in secondo luogo, viene esaminata la sostenibilità di ciascun argomento. Sia per le posizioni scettiche sia per quelle relativistiche si sosterrà la rilevanza della distinzione tra argomentazione a priori e argomentazione a posteriori.

CONTENTS: 1. INTRODUCTION - 2. SCEPTICAL ARGUMENTS AGAINST EMPIRICAL KNOWLEDGE - 3. RELATIVISTIC ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE OBJECTIVITY OF VALUES.

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper is devoted to the analysis of the soundness of some well-known arguments for epistemic scepticism against the

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SELF-DEFEATING ARGUMENTS;
ARGUMENT OF THE OASIS.

PAROLE CHIAVE

SCETTICISMO;
RELATIVISMO;
TEORIA DELLA CONOSCENZA;
VALORI ETICI;
ARGOMENTI AUTOCONTRADDITTORI;
ARGOMENTO DELL'OASI;
NORBERTO BOBBIO;
BLAISE PASCAL;
SESTO EMPIRICO.

possibility of empirical knowledge (or a posteriori knowledge) of the external world and for ethical relativism against the universality (or objectivity) of ethical values.

First of all, we need to distinguish between at least two principal meanings of the phrase 'epistemic scepticism': in fact the phrase 'epistemic scepticism' can refer either to (i) the philosophical attitude to doubt and refrain from holding beliefs or (ii) the philosophical

theory according to which knowledge is not possible or at least is much more limited than we ordinarily think. In this paper, I will consider epistemic scepticism as a philosophical theory and will analyse arguments lying in this kind of scepticism. Such arguments are generally, and often too roughly, rejected as self-defeating (or inconsistent). My purpose is to assess for each sceptical argument whether this criticism is tenable.

In the second place, we need to clarify the distinction between this kind of epistemic scepticism and ethical relativism. Evidently, they are not the same: while epistemic scepticism denies the possibility of knowledge, ethical relativism denies the objectivity of ethical values and norms. However, I believe that this formulation of the distinction is not sufficient to understand the structural difference between the two philosophical tasks. When the epistemic sceptics assert that it is not possible for the epistemic subject to have true justified beliefs about the facts of the world, they mean that this impossibility is *a parte subjecti*: they do not deny that things can exist, but they deny that the subject is able to know (to have true justified beliefs about) them; and they do not deny that facts can happen, but deny that the subject is able to know (to have true justified beliefs about) them. On the contrary, when most ethical relativists assert that there are no absolute (or objective) ethical values, they deny the existence of them: the impossibility of knowing them is *a parte objecti*; in a certain sense, we can say that for most relativists the expressions ‘S knows the ethical value *v*’ or ‘S knows that the behaviour *b* is ethically good’ is not false, but is meaningless.¹

2 SCEPTICAL ARGUMENTS AGAINST EMPIRICAL KNOWLEDGE

2.1 ARGUMENT FROM ACTUAL ERROR

Suppose that, while dreaming, I have had evidence to believe a false *a posteriori* proposi-

¹ For the definitory problem of ethical relativism see S. F. Magni, *Che cos'è il relativismo morale*, Roma, 2015.

tion concerning the external world to be true. In particular, while dreaming, I have wrongly believed that it was raining, but in reality it was not. Since in that case my wrong belief was based on evidence, as it happens when I have correct perceptions, I cannot distinguish between a true *a posteriori* proposition and a false *a posteriori* proposition².

Let us try to discover the premises and the conclusion of this type of argument, which I label as “argument from actual error”.

The arguments from actual error rely on two *a posteriori* premises: [1] I have been in error while dreaming. In this context I define “error” the state of affairs in which I believe that *p* and *p* is false; [2] when I have wrongly believed that *p*, I had evidence to believe that *p*.

The first premise is *a posteriori*: it asserts that a certain epistemic error has occurred. The second premise asserts that the subject’s belief that *p* was based on evidence: it is also *a posteriori*.

The conclusion of the argument states that the epistemic subject cannot distinguish between the situation in which he is in error and the situation in which he is right.

The arguments from *actual* error rely on *a posteriori* premises.

2.2 ARGUMENT FROM POSSIBLE ERROR

It is possible that an evil genius (as imagined by Descartes)³ has been so far constantly and coherently deceiving me, making me have always wrong perceptions. I have no means to exclude that this possible scenario is real.

This type of argument, which I label as “argument from possible error”, relies on the following *a priori* premise: [3] it is possible that under the control of an evil genius I am led to be in error for every *a posteriori* proposition which I have evidence to believe true.

The conclusion is the same of the argument

² See R. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* Vol. II, Cambridge, 1984.

³ See R. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* Vol. II, Cambridge, 1984.

from possible error: the epistemic subject cannot distinguish between the situation in which he is in error and the situation in which he is right (with regard to the knowledge of the external world).

The arguments from *possible* error rely on an *a priori* premise.

2.3 THE SOUNDNESS OF SCEPTICISM

The aim of this section is to formulate a suitable question on the soundness of scepticism; we could say that its topic is the quest for a question.

In order to conceive such a question on scepticism, it will prove useful to discuss a point made by G. E. Moore in *Four Forms of Scepticism*. He holds that the scepticism which he has considered is based on four beliefs, but he argues with regard to such believed propositions: «I do not think it is *rational* to be as certain of any one of these four propositions, as of the proposition that I do know that this is a pencil. And how on earth is it to be decided which of the two things it is *rational* to be most certain of?»⁴

I would say that the sceptic criticizes some beliefs on the basis of some other beliefs. Let us call “beta beliefs” the beliefs which are criticized and “alpha beliefs” the beliefs which ground his criticism. The problem of the tenability of scepticism could be regarded as the problem of the relation between beta beliefs and alpha beliefs and can be expressed as the following: is it possible to conceive a form of scepticism, in which alpha beliefs support the critique of beta beliefs, i.e. for which it is more rational to uphold alpha beliefs than beta beliefs? Let us consider how those groups of beliefs work in the two kinds of sceptical arguments so far considered.

⁴ The four propositions recalled by G. E. Moore, *Four Forms of Scepticism*, in *Philosophical Papers*, London, 1959, p. 226, are the following: «(1) that I do not know these things [that this is a pencil, etc.] immediately; (2) That they don't follow logically from any thing or things that I do know immediately; (3) That, if (1) and (2) are true, my belief in or knowledge of them must be based on 'analogical or inductive argument'; and (4) That what is so based cannot be *certain knowledge*».

With regard to the argument from actual error of the dreamer, the epistemic subject who assumes the premise [1] («I have been in error while dreaming...») to be true presupposes the possibility of knowing that the subject has been in error. In order to state that he has been in error while believing that *p*, the subject should know that non-*p* (for example, in order to know that he was in error while in a dream he has believed that it was raining, he should know that it was not raining): in other words, empirical knowledge of the external world should be possible. The arguments from actual error criticize what they presuppose: if the premise is asserted to be true, then the conclusion (namely the assertion that the epistemic subject cannot distinguish between the situations in which he is in error and those in which he is right) is false. The argument from actual error we have so far considered, in order to prove the impossibility of empirical knowledge of the external world, presuppose *sinconsistently* that possibility.

The form of scepticism which is yielded by the argument of actual error is self-defeating: it can be expressed by the following sentence: «I deny on the basis of a *posteriori* knowledge of the external world the possibility of a *posteriori* knowledge of the external world».

Alpha beliefs and beta beliefs belong to the very same class: such a *posteriori* scepticism is therefore not tenable.

On the contrary, the arguments from possible error presuppose the possibility of being in error, not the possibility of knowing that a certain error has occurred. On the basis of a *priori* beliefs, they rule out the possibility of a *posteriori* beliefs.

The reason of inconsistency that undermines the argument from actual error (sameness of beta beliefs and alpha beliefs) is not present in the argument from possible error.

2.4 THE ARGUMENT OF THE OASIS (ARGUMENT FROM UNSPECIFIED ACTUAL ERROR)

In this section I try to create a sceptical argument that I will hold to be tenable.

Let us suppose that a desperate and thirsty man walking in the Sahara desert, after hours of roaming in the sunny land, suddenly has evidence to see a relieving oasis far from him. But later, as he starts approaching it, he does not see any oasis at all (i.e. he has evidence to believe that there is no oasis at all).

Since the epistemic subject has had two conflicting *a posteriori* beliefs on the same matter (the existence of the oasis), he can conclude that he has been wrong in one of the two beliefs, but he does not know which. According to such an argument, the epistemic subject knows that an error has occurred, but he does not know anything about the existence of the oasis (he does not know whether *q* or *non-q*). Therefore, the argument of the oasis seems to be a coherent sort of the argument from actual error, in which the error cannot be specified. While according to the premise of the argument from actual error he claims to know which error has occurred, here he knows that an error has occurred, but he does not know which it is. Should we conclude that there are two sorts of arguments from actual error, namely an argument from specified error (self-defeating) and an argument from unspecified error (self-consistent)?

Let us investigate the matter further and go back to our desperate man in the desert: at the time *T*₁, the epistemic subject believes that in the place *P* there is an oasis (belief 1 or *B*₁); at the time *T*₂, he believes that in the place *P* there are no oases at all (belief 2 or *B*₂). Let us list the two possible unspecified errors: (i) The oasis has always been there. The subject has been wrong at *T*₂; (ii) the oasis has never been there. The subject has been wrong at *T*₁.

But there are two other possible, even if improbable, combinations: (iii) at the time *T*₁ an oasis does exist in the place *P* and at the time *T*₂ no oasis exists in the place *P*; (iv) at the time *T*₁ no oasis exists in the place *P* and at the time *T*₂ an oasis exists in the place *P*.

This change could be, at least, operated by a very quick and efficient deceitful demon.

In combination (iii), the epistemic subject is right in both beliefs, while in combination (iv) he is wrong twice.

The relevant combination for my objection is (iii). As one can see, it seems that in the argument of the oasis, we cannot ever legitimately assert that the epistemic subject has actually been in error.

The idea that the epistemic subject has been in error on one of the two occasions relies on the assumption that his two beliefs are in conflict. Actually they are not, because they cannot be, as they concern different facts: belief *B*₁ concerns the existence of an oasis in place *P* at time *T*₁; belief *B*₂ concerns the existence of an oasis in place *P* at time *T*₂.

Therefore, one might say, such argument of the oasis is compatible with two classes of possible worlds: *W*₁: the epistemic subject has been (at least once) in error [combinations (i), (ii), (iv)]; *W*₂: the epistemic subject has not been in error [combination (iii)].

The point is that we lack information to know which of the two is the case. So, it would seem we cannot consider the argument of the oasis as an argument from unspecified actual error at all. It just sketches a situation that we have no sufficient data to classify as *W*₁ or *W*₂.

According to this view, the argument of the oasis would seem to collapse directly into an argument from possible error: we just do not know whether an error has occurred. Its specificity would only consist in its locality: while in the evil genius example the possible worlds may differ very widely, in the oasis argument they just conflict on the existence of refreshment for our courageous traveller. Anyway, we are here interested in the tenability of scepticism, and not in its width.

Yet if we examine the situation less naïvely, we may come to a different conclusion, i.e. to hold that at least one error has been anyway made by the subject even if not on the existence of the oasis, i.e. even if our man has been right in both *B*₁ and *B*₂.

The subject who expected to achieve a correct percept of the conformation of the land in place *P* has at least wrongly believed himself to live in a fairly constant world, in which oases do not come and go in a sudden and a territory cannot be modified with that extraordinary efficiency. This is actually a third belief (*B*₃). Of

course, this is a general belief about the natural laws of the world (usually obtained by a questionable inductive procedure) and not a particular belief about individual facts of the world (obtained through perception). Nevertheless it also belongs to the set of the thirsty man's beliefs, which the sceptic intends to shake.

To re-collect the different epistemic options, our man is certainly wrong in at least one of his three beliefs: (i) he is wrong in B₁, in case the oasis has never been in place P; (ii) he is wrong in B₂, in case the oasis has always been in place P; (iii) he is wrong in B₃, in case the oasis has appeared or disappeared under his attention.

This new argument of the oasis avoids specifying which belief is wrong (i.e. which actual error has occurred) and does not involve any *a posteriori* claim on the external world: it does not presuppose that knowledge of the external world is possible. Therefore, we have to revise the classification of sceptical arguments. In particular, we need to distinguish between two relevant types of arguments from actual error: arguments like the argument of the oasis analysed in this section, which can be labelled as "arguments from unspecified actual error" and seem to be tenable; arguments like the argument of the dreamer, which can be labelled as "arguments from specified actual error" and are untenable.

3 RELATIVISTIC ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE OBJECTIVITY OF VALUES

The distinction between *a priori* premises and *a posteriori* premises plays a relevant role also for the soundness of relativistic arguments, even if here the challenge is not that of inconsistency, but that of inadequacy of the premises to ground the conclusion.

3.1 ARGUMENT FROM POSSIBLE DISAGREEMENT IN SEXTUS EMPIRICUS

Sextus Empiricus elaborates his sceptical view on ethical values in at least two of his writings: in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* and in *Against the Logicians*.

In *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Book III, § 182, Sextus holds that it is impossible to attain the knowledge of axiological values (in particular, of the good):

[...] There is nothing good by nature. In fact it is impossible to believe either all the views now set forth, because of their conflicting character, or any one of them. For he who asserts that one must believe this view, but not that, becomes a party to the controversy, since he has opposed to him the arguments of those who take the rival view, and therefore he himself, along with the rest, will need an adjudicator instead of pronouncing judgement on others. And as there does not exist any agreed criterion [κριτήριον] or proof owing to the unsettled controversy about these matters, he will be reduced to suspending judgement, and consequently he will be unable to affirm positively what the good by nature is.⁵

In the second place, in *Against the Logicians*, Book I, § 315-316, Sextus argues that it is impossible to find (and to found) any criterion:

Now each of those who claim to have discovered it [the criterion] either makes this declaration by merely asserting it or adduces a proof. But he will not utter it by assertion; for one of those who belong to the opposite side will utter an assertion claiming the opposite, and in this case the former will be no more trustworthy than the latter [...].

But if his declaration is accompanied by proof, it must be sound proof. But in order to ascertain that proof, we must possess a criterion, and one that is already agreed upon; but we do not possess an undisputed criterion, it being the object of inquiry; therefore it is not possible to discover a criterion.⁶

In this complex argument we can recognize three of the five Agrippan modes [τρόποι],

⁵ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Cambridge (Ma.), 1993, pp. 448-451.

⁶ Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Logicians*, Cambridge (Ma.), 1997, pp. 166-167.

composed together.⁷ The five modes produced by Agrippa [I century A. D.] are the following:

disagreement [diaphonía], defined by Sextus as “the one in virtue of which we discover that on any matter proposed there has been undecided faction both among laymen and among the philosophers. And because of the dispute we cannot choose or reject anything, and so end in suspension of judgement”; *circularity* or *reciprocity* [diállelos], which holds that, given a couple of statements, each statement relies on the other; *hypothesis* [hypóthesis], which holds that some statements are believed to be true without justification; *infinite (endless) regression* [ápeiron], which holds that each statement receives his justification by another belief, and so on, *ad infinitum*, to an infinite regression; *relation* [prós ti], which holds that nothing can be perceived as it really is.⁸

The three Agrippan modes operating in Sextus’ argument are the following: hypothesis; disagreement; infinite regression.

Let us see how these three Agrippan modes interrelate in Sextus’ argument:

in the first place, Sextus holds that a criterion simply assumed, without justification, is not established: it is only proposed in a dogmatic manner (*mode of hypothesis*): “but he will not utter it by assertion”; *in the second place*, Sextus holds that there can be disagreement over a criterion which is not justified (*mode of disagreement*): “for one of those who belong to the opposite side will utter an assertion claiming the opposite, and in this case the former will be no more trustworthy than the latter”; *in the third place*, Sextus holds that the justification of a criterion needs another criterion (a criterion of second order), and so on, to an infinite regression (*mode of infinite regression*): “but if his declaration is accompanied by proof, it must be sound proof. But in order to ascertain that proof, we must possess a criterion, and one that is already agreed upon; but we do not

possess an undisputed criterion, it being the object of inquiry; therefore it is not possible to discover a criterion”.

3.2 ARGUMENTS FROM ACTUAL DISAGREEMENT IN BLAISE PASCAL AND NORBERTO BOBBIO

In the previous section I have dealt with Sextus’ argument against the possibility of founding axiological values. In the modern age, fifteen centuries later, Blaise Pascal in *Pensées* (1670) holds the impossibility of objective axiological values (in particular, the right [*le juste*]) as follows:

Sur quoi la fondera-t-il, l'économie du monde qu'il veut gouverner? [...] Sera-ce sur la justice, il l'ignore. Certainement, s'il la connaissait [...], on la verrait plantée par tous les États du monde et dans tous les temps, au lieu qu'on ne voit rien de juste ou d'injuste qui ne change de qualité en changeant de climat.

Trois degrés d'élévation du pôle renversent toute la jurisprudence. Un méridien décide de la vérité. En peu d'années de possession les lois fondamentales changent. [...]

Plaisante justice qu'une rivière borne! [...] Vérité au deçà des Pyrénées, erreur au delà.⁹

Three centuries later than Pascal, Norberto Bobbio in *L'età dei diritti* offers various arguments to support ethical relativism, one of which, particularly vivid, is structurally similar to the one offered by Pascal:

From the search for the foundation [of human rights] grows the illusion of the absolute foundation, the belief that - after evaluating and gathering reasons and arguments - we will end finding the undisputable argument which nobody can refuse to agree with. [...] This illusion was shared for centuries by natural law

⁷ On the application of Agrippan modes see J. Barnes, *The Toils of Scepticism*, 1990, pp. 113-144.

⁸ A wider list of sceptical modes (ten modes) was made by Aenesidemus. On the application of modes operated by Sextus Empiricus see also M. Dal Pra, *Lo scetticismo greco*, Roma-Bari, 1989.

⁹ B. Pascal, *Pensées*, Paris, 2000, pp. 80-81. A recent application of Pascal’s argument to the question of the existence of natural law is in D. Antiseri, *Esiste il diritto naturale?*, in F. Di Blasi/ P. Heritier (eds.), *La vitalità del diritto naturale*, Palermo, pp. 315-335.

philosophers. [...] Yet human nature proved to be a very fragile absolute foundation for human rights. A great number of rights, even the most different, and the least fundamental – fundamental only in the opinion of their supporters – were traced back to the generous and complacent nature of man. For example, natural law philosophers disputed for long time whether the most natural solution for the inheritance of the assets was either the restitution to the community, or the transmission from father to children, or the owner's free disposal. They could continue with their dispute: in fact, all the three solutions are fully coherent with human nature.¹⁰

3.3 THE SOUNDNESS OF RELATIVISM

Sextus' argument is *a priori* Pascal's and Bobbio's arguments are *a posteriori*. Sextus' argument does not rely on any empirical (or factual) belief: it relies on the *possibility* of conflicting axiological judgements; on the contrary, Pascal's argument does rely on the empirical (or factual) belief that conflicting axiological judgements have in fact been held in the history of human kind and that no agreement has been attained.

Pascal's and Bobbio's arguments are not self-defeating, but I believe that they are not tenable: in order to demonstrate the impossibility of absolute ethical values is not sufficient to show that people did not come to an agreement about ethical values. The contingent fact that there has been so far disagreement does not imply that it is impossible to found values. The premises of these arguments are not sufficient to prove the conclusion. And they are neither necessary: even the fact that everybody in the entire human history have agreed on a certain value does not entail that this value is objective (or absolute).

It can be noticed that Pascal's and Bobbio's arguments rely on one and one only of the

10 N. Bobbio, *Letà dei diritti*, Torino, pp. 6-7. For other arguments in support of ethical relativism see U. Scarpelli, *L'etica senza verità*, Bologna, 1982 and H. Kelsen, *Che cos'è la giustizia? Lezioni americane*, Macerata, 2015.

Agrippan modes: the mode of disagreement, while Sextus' argument adds to the mode of disagreement two other modes. The addition of the two other modes transforms an argument from actual disagreement into an argument from possible disagreement.¹¹

I believe that Sextus' argument is tenable. Sextus holds that an objective (or absolute) criterion cannot be attained. In fact, I add, the concept itself of criterion, defined as a justified basic (or fundamental) belief, is contradictory: a belief cannot be at the same time both basic (or fundamental) and justified.

At this point it is worth asking ourselves whether Sextus' argument could pass Moore's tenability test. In fact we can say, following Moore, that a relativistic argument criticizes some beliefs on the basis of some other beliefs.¹² Let us call 'beta beliefs' the beliefs which are criticized and 'alpha beliefs' the beliefs which ground his criticism. The problem of the tenability of Sextus' relativism could be regarded as the problem of the relationship between beta beliefs and alpha beliefs. Beta belief is: «it is possible to discover a criterion». Alpha beliefs are the following: «each of those who claim to have discovered it [the criterion] either makes this declaration by merely asserting it or adduces a proof»; «one of those who belong to the opposite side will utter an assertion claiming the opposite, and in this case the former will be no more trustworthy than the latter»; «in order to ascertain that proof, we must possess a criterion, and one that is already agreed upon»; «we do not possess an undisputed criterion, it being the object of inquiry». It seems to me that in Sextus' argument it

11 On moral disagreement see also J. A. Ryan, *Moral Relativism and the Argument from Disagreement*, in "Journal of Social Philosophy", XXXIV (2003), pp. 377-386 and K. Schafer, *Assessor Relativism and the Problem of Moral Disagreement*, in "Southern Journal of Philosophy", L (2012), pp. 602-620.

12 One may also reply to Moore's criticism that the position of the sceptic is that of a pure enquirer, a person who is solely devoted to the search for certainty, a kind of enquiry which raises the truth-ratio to the absolute maximum and is not to be brought into practical matters. On the situation of pure enquiry see B. Williams, *cit.*, pp. 46-47.

is more rational to hold alpha beliefs than beta beliefs, because alpha beliefs are *a priori* beliefs.

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