

## DISCUSIONES

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### AN EXORCISM OF AN EVIL DEMON OF SKEPTICISM

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In the first chapter of *Ignorance: A Case for Scepticism*, Peter Unger presents an argument which “is the same in form as the ‘evil genius’ argument in Descartes’s *Meditations*; it is but a more modern, scientific counterpart, with its domain of application confined to matters concerning the external world” (8).<sup>1</sup> The argument goes as follows:

- A) (1) If someone, anyone, knows that  $p$  (where  $p$  is any proposition about anything of the external world), then the person can know that there is no evil scientist deceiving him into falsely believing that  $p$ . (7)
- (2) No one can ever know that there is no evil scientist deceiving him. (8)
- (3) Hence, no one ever knows that  $p$ .
- (4) Therefore, no one ever knows anything about the external world. (8)

Unger use of “anything of the external world” excludes Platonic universals, numbers, the knowledge of logical or

<sup>1</sup> All parenthetical numbers at the end of a sentence refer to the pagination of *Ignorance: A Case for Scepticism*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1975.

analytic truths which may happen to be exemplified in the external world, and such truths as “I know that I exist”. Consequently, he is not directing his skepticism toward these topics. However, his use of “anything of the external world” includes all cases of knowledge which entail the existence or nonexistence of some concrete entity outside one’s mind, e.g., some bachelors are carefree, no bachelors are purple (11–12).

If one is persuaded by (A), then one may decide to take refuge in the realm of reasonable beliefs. One may always be wrong in believing such things as there being rocks, but one may still be reasonable in believing in them. But according to Unger such retreats are futile for the following reasons.

- B) (1) If one cannot know anything about the external world, then one cannot have any reason for believing anything about it.  
(2) One cannot know anything about the external world.  
(3) Therefore, one cannot have reasons for believing anything about the external world. (36–37)
- C) (1) If you are reasonable in believing that  $p$ , then you can be reasonable in believing that there is no evil scientist deceiving you into falsely believing that  $p$ .  
(2) Your experience can never give you any reason for believing that there is no evil scientist deceiving you.  
(3) Hence, you are not reasonable in believing that  $p$ . (39)

Unger says of these arguments, “Their being ignored has nothing to do with anyone’s finding any serious fault with the arguments, for none has ever been exposed” (9).

I shall attempt to expose some serious faults. They begin with his defense of premise A(2) where he deals with a Moorean attempt to reverse his argument: I do know that

there are rocks, so it follows from A(1) that I do know that there is no evil scientist who is deceiving me into falsely believing that there are no rocks. Unger responds as follows.

One cannot help but think that for all this philosopher really can *know*, he might have all his experience artificially induced by electrodes, these being operated by a terribly evil scientist [...] One's belief that one has [had contact with such a scientist] may, for all one can really know, be due to experiences induced by just such a chuckling operator. For all one can *know*, then, there may not really be any rocks. [...]

I think that these reflections make a strong intuitive case for the idea that, no matter what coherent situation one considers, no one there will ever *know* that there is no evil scientist who is deceiving him into falsely believing that there are rocks. And, this makes it very compelling indeed, I suggest, that no one *can* or ever *could know* this thing. While I am *not* absolutely *certain* that our argument can't be reversed, the more I think about it the more this does seem so. (25–28)

My reconstructed support for A(2) goes as follows.

A(2.2) *It is possible that* an evil scientist (or demon) deceives everyone into believing that *p* (where *p* also includes all the evidence advanced against the existence of such a scientist).

A(2.1) Hence, *it is possible that* all our empirical claims that *p* are false (& the claim, “There is no evil scientist deceiving me”, is empirical).

A(2) Thus, no one can ever know that there is no evil scientist deceiving him.

In this reconstruction the premises A(2.2) and A(2.1) are presented as possibilities because all the key statements in Unger's defense of A(2) are hedged by such words as “may” and “might”. (I have not quoted Unger's whole defense of

A(2) because it is too wordy, but the above quotation is a fair representation.) This hedging is quite unavoidable for any competent skeptic. For if he were to state his evidence more strongly, it would fall within the realm of empirical knowledge, and so the evidence would be inconsistent with the intended final conclusion that there is no empirical knowledge: the result would be an invalid argument. How does this hedging affect his argument? Skeptics focus on the issue of truth because any claim to knowing that  $p$  entails (by definition) that  $p$  is true, and if all the assertions  $p$  are false, then one does not know anything. But does this conclusion follow from the claim that *it is possible that* each empirical claim  $p$  is false?

Let us examine what logically follows from such a possibility. Let “Kp” stand for “ $p$  is known”, and “Tp” for “ $p$  is true”. Let “ $\square$ ” and “ $\diamond$ ” respectively stand for the necessity and possibility operators, such that “ $\square$ Kp” means “It is necessary that  $p$  is known”, and “ $\diamond$ Tp” means “It is possible that  $p$  is true”.

- D) (1)  $\square(Kp \rightarrow Tp)$ , true by definition.  
 (2)  $\square Kp \rightarrow \square Tp$ , from 1, axiom of modal logic.  
 (3)  $\diamond \sim Tp$ , given, from the possibility or deceiving demons/scientists.  
 (4)  $\sim \square Tp$ , from 3, definition of “ $\diamond$ ”: “ $\sim \square \sim$ ”; double negation.  
 (5)  $\sim \square Kp$ , from 2, 4, modus tollens.  
 (6)  $\diamond \sim Kp$ , from 5, definition of “ $\square$ ”: “ $\sim \diamond \sim$ ”; double negation.

In other words, from the mere possibility of  $p$  not being true, one can only validly conclude the mere possibility of  $p$  not being known. So, from the mere possibility that there is an all deceiving scientist, or evil demon, Unger can only validly conclude that we *possibly* do not know anything.

His mistake is that of trying to deduce the actuality of  $p$  not being known from the mere possibility of  $p$  being false.

A skeptic might try to avoid the preceding argument by claiming that  $\diamond\sim Tp$  at D(3) represents epistemic possibility and not logical possibility, and that I am misrepresenting his position. There are a number of problems with this appeal to epistemic possibility. But first let us agree that to say that “ $\diamond\sim Tp$ ” expresses epistemic possibility is simply to say that  $\sim Tp$  is consistent with current *a priori* or empirical knowledge, that  $\sim Tp$  is not ruled out by either type of knowledge. First, skeptics cannot claim that  $\sim Tp$  is consistent with empirical knowledge because they would be assuming what they are trying to disprove. Secondly, if they consider  $\sim Tp$  to be consistent with *a priori* knowledge, this is still not enough to assert that  $\sim Tp$  is true. For  $\sim Tp$  is a statement about empirical claims, and both the falsity or truth of such statements is consistent with *a priori* knowledge. Therefore, its being consistent with *a priori* knowledge does not entail that it is true. Yet the truth of  $\sim Tp$  is required in order to deduce the intended final conclusion that  $\sim Kp$ . Therefore,  $\sim Kp$  cannot be deduced even if we grant that  $\diamond\sim Tp$  at D(3) represents epistemic possibility.

Unger, and any sceptic who attempts to establish that there is no empirical knowledge from the possibility of deceiving demons and evil scientists, is caught in a tight dilemma. Either he presents stronger evidence for A(2) or he does not. If he does, then his final conclusion dismisses his evidence: his premises are inconsistent with his conclusion, and so his argument is invalid. If he does not, and yet still attempts to deduce  $\sim Kp$  from  $\diamond\sim Tp$ , then he commits the modal fallacy discussed above. Consequently, in either case, the argument in support of A(2) is invalid. Therefore, argument (A) —and other versions analogous to it— cannot be proven to be sound.

Unger, and any sceptic who uses a similar kind of argument, could easily avoid this defect by simply inferring what does logically follow: we *possibly* do not know anything. But is the justified assertion that  $\diamond\sim Kp$  still sufficient to reject the claim that  $Kp$ ? It is not too clear what would be the basis of that rejection. The only one I can think of is that both statements appear to be inconsistent, and so the truth of  $\diamond\sim Kp$  would seem to entail the falsity of  $Kp$ .

I shall examine this apparent inconsistency from formal and nonformal perspectives. First, I shall show that  $\diamond\sim Kp$  and  $Kp$  are formally consistent. In order to simplify the argument, I shall examine the apparent inconsistency with the claims,  $\diamond\sim P$  and  $P$ . Let us assume that they are inconsistent. Then (a) if  $\diamond\sim P$  is true,  $P$  is false. This consequence is false, for the possibility of falsehood does not entail the actuality of falsehood. From our assumption there also follows (b) if  $P$  is true, then  $\diamond\sim P$  false:  $\sim\diamond\sim P$ , i.e.,  $\Box P$ . Thus, if  $P$  is true, then  $\Box P$ . But this consequence is false because no contingently true statement is necessarily true. Consequently, in either case, the assumption is false, and so  $P$  and  $\diamond\sim P$  are consistent. Since the same reasoning applies to  $\diamond\sim Kp$  and  $Kp$ , they too are consistent.

The preceding formal analysis does not sound as convincing when we translate these claims into ordinary language use. I shall now consider a nonformal perspective. It does not seem consistent to utter “I know that it is raining” and “It is possible that I do not know that it is raining”, when I am standing outside drenched in a torrential rain, and there is nothing wrong with me (e.g., I am not drugged, hypnotized, etc.). The reason for this inconsistency is that “possible” is used in such contexts to express doubt.

But now we must consider the kind of doubt that this use of “possible” involves. If it is the kind of doubt that is

supported by evidence, then a sceptic cannot appeal to that doubt because the same difficulty exposed earlier recurs: the sceptic would have to advance evidence that would be dismissed by the conclusion he is trying to establish. In other words, at least one of his premises would be inconsistent with his conclusion, and so his argument would be invalid.

If it is merely psychological doubt, and thus devoid of any support, then there are no rational grounds for dismissing our claims of knowledge. Therefore, this nonformal perspective on the apparent inconsistency of  $\diamond\sim P$  and  $P$ , and  $\diamond\sim Kp$  and  $Kp$ , does not help Unger.

In conclusion, it would seem that since  $\diamond\sim Kp$  and  $Kp$  are consistent, then  $\diamond\sim Kp$  cannot be used to reject  $Kp$ . Hence, even if  $\diamond\sim Kp$  is soundly derived, the truth of A(2) is not established, and so argument (A) is not proven to be sound.

The faults in argument (A) affect argument (B). Since argument (A) is the only support for premise B(2), argument (B) is also not proven to be sound.

With respect to argument (C), the attempt to support premise C(2) involves the same mistakes as those exposed in the defense of A(2). His only support for C(2) is that “any of your experiences may be due to a scientist’s operations” (39). Again, Unger tries to justify a claim of fact with a claim hedged by “may”. So, either Unger or any sceptic presents stronger evidence for C(2) or he does not. If he does, he will have to appeal to experience, but this experience is dismissed by the intended conclusion that experience can never give you reason for believing that there is no evil scientist deceiving you. If he does not appeal to stronger evidence, and yet infers the unhedged C(2), then he commits the modal fallacy exposed in his support for A(2). Consequently, in either case of this tight dilemma, the argument in support of C(2) is invalid. Therefore, ar-

gument (C) —and other versions analogous to it— cannot be proven to be sound.

The implicit reasoning supporting C(2) is invalid in another way. Argument (C) is analogous in form to argument (A). The plausibility of (A) depends on the fact that  $Kp$  entails  $Tp$ . But a fundamental feature of belief is that it is not the case that  $Bp$  entails  $Tp$ . Even if we say that one's belief that  $p$  is reasonable, this statement does not entail that  $p$  is true. Unger seems to overlook an essential difference between “ $p$  is believed” and “ $p$  is known”.

However, even if we granted that  $p$  is true when one's belief that  $p$  is reasonable, the mere possibility that  $p$  is not true would only establish the possibility that one's belief that  $p$  is not reasonable. This is the same problem we encountered with argument (A).

I have described some serious faults with Unger's arguments. I shall now advance an argument against this kind of skepticism which, to my knowledge, has never been advanced. I shall not be defending the claim that there are no evil scientists or demons deceiving us, but rather merely use the same argument form employed by Unger and other skeptics.

Just as Unger and like-minded skeptics can conjure up possible demons or evil scientists that lead us to false beliefs about the external world, I can conjure up possible angels and saintly scientists that lead us to true beliefs about that world. However powerful Unger's evil scientists and demons, I can imagine immeasurably more powerful saintly scientists and angels. If the possibility —regardless of its nature— of deceiving demons and evil scientists suffices to discredit our claims of knowledge, then, *by parity of reasoning*, the same possibility of more powerful angels and saintly scientists who eliminate these deceptions should prevent our claims of knowledge from being discredited. Of course the skeptics can imagine other more powerful

demons than my angels; but whatever level they have, I can imagine even more powerful angels.

We have a possible regress on our hands. Its derivation does not arise from any actual volleying between sceptics and myself. For if a sceptic were to burn out mentally at some stage( $n$ ) of these exchanges, and I were to imagine a more powerful angel at the stage( $n+1$ ), this would not undermine the sceptics' position because it would still be possible that there are even more powerful demons at stage( $n+2$ ). Similarly, if I were to stop the exchange, for whatever reason, this would not weaken my position because it would still be possible that there are progressively more powerful angels at higher levels. The regress arises from the possibility of the following conjunction: for any deceiving demon there is a more powerful angel who eliminates this demonic deception, and for any angel who eliminates demonic deception, there is a more powerful demon that reestablishes the deception.

For whom is this possible regress vicious, the sceptics or the nonsceptics? I shall answer this question by drawing out the implications of the possible regress, and relate these implications to the goals of the sceptics and nonsceptics.

This possible regress entails two statements (in that possible world):

- (1) Every demonic deception is neutralized.
- (2) Every angelic "de-deception" is neutralized.

These statements respectively entail the following.

- (3) The possibility of demons or evil scientists who deceive everyone does not provide any support for the claim that there is no empirical knowledge: these possible entities are not epistemologically menacing in any way whatsoever.
- (4) The possibility of angels and saintly scientists who eliminate this demonic deception does not provide any

support for the claim that there is empirical knowledge: these possible entities are not epistemologically reassuring in any way whatsoever.

For whom are these consequences unacceptable? Consequence (4) is not problematic for nonskeptics because they do not use such angelic possibilities to support their claims of empirical knowledge. However, consequence (3) is problematic for some skeptics like Unger because they do use such possible demons and evil scientists to support their claim that there is no empirical knowledge. This possible regress shows that the possibility of deceiving demons or evil scientists not only fails to establish that there is no empirical knowledge, but also fails to provide even any support.

I have argued that whether a skeptic argues from the logical or epistemic possibility, he fails to prove that all empirical claims are false. I then used the very same form of the evil-scientist-demon argument to show that it fails to provide any support for Unger's skeptical position. Despite his doubt that his argument can be "reversed" (27), I have shown that it can be.

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## RESUMEN

Argumento algunos graves errores pasados por alto en una versión del argumento escéptico que se basa en la posibilidad de un demonio o científico malignos que nos llevan a creencias falsas acerca del mundo externo.

*[Traducción: Claudia Chávez]*