Introduction

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Abstract

This introduction provides an overview of the content of the papers published in the special issue on epistemic vice and forms of scepticism.

Keywords

The present issue initially started life as a workshop on the title theme that I organized at the University of Southampton in 2018. It contains some of the papers given at the workshop, as well as ones specially commissioned for the present edition. The result is an innovative compilation that explores the connexions between epistemic vice and scepticism in new and interesting ways. For although virtue epistemology is currently a booming topic, and some attempts have been made at applying virtue theoretic insights to questions about radical scepticism, not much work has so far been done towards showing in what sense, if any, scepticism might itself be vicious, or be seen to exhibit, or depend on, habits of thought better characterized as epistemic vices. All five contributions have something to say about this topic, but approach it in quite different ways. Schönbaumsfeld, for example, explores the question whether falling prey to a 'global' scepticism is the result of giving in to one's epistemic angst rather than the upshot of a convincing argument, while Le Morvan attempts to characterize different forms of scepticism as themselves either virtuous or vicious. Carter, on the other hand, addresses the question of how one might resist an 'obfuscating demon' who attacks our understanding rather than our knowledge by appealing to a form of virtue perspectivism,

while Avnur probes the limits of critical scepticism and offers a Humean response to it. McGlynn develops Medina's suggestion that his vice-theoretic account of active ignorance reveals interesting parallels with 'external world' scepticism.

The volume kicks off with Avnur's article, in which he explores two different forms of 'theoretical' scepticism: 'critical' and 'non-critical'. He construes scepticism as a position or paradox that is motivated by 'the lack of evidence argument': since we neither possess a posteriori nor a priori evidence that we are not brains-in-vats, we lack independent evidence to believe that the sceptical hypothesis is false. Since most of us at the very least believe things incompatible with the truth of this hypothesis (for example, that there are tables and chairs), this seems to violate 'the evidentialist principle' that it is wrong, from an epistemic perspective, to believe something that one lacks (independent) evidence for. This includes the sceptics themselves insofar as they are not 'practicing sceptics'—i.e., sceptics who, according to Avnur, actually have the relevant doubts and live according to them. He distinguishes the latter from the 'theoretical sceptics' who, while failing to live up to their own standards, nevertheless think that one *ought* to have the doubts, and that not to do so is an epistemic—albeit entirely natural and understandable—shortcoming. So, 'theoretical sceptics' need not necessarily be 'critical sceptics', where being a 'critical sceptic' entails believing that our 'credulity' in respect to believing the falsity of the sceptical hypothesis constitutes an epistemic vice for which we deserve to be criticized. The 'non-critical' theoretical sceptic, on the other hand, whom Avnur defends, does not believe that we deserve censure for our credulity despite agreeing with her 'critical' counterpart that believing the contrary of a sceptical hypothesis is epistemically bad (albeit not vicious).

In the next contribution, Schönbaumsfeld explores the relation between epistemic angst, intellectual courage and radical scepticism. She distinguishes between three different ways of motivating scepticism that are prevalent in the contemporary literature, but are usually not distinguished: recent envatment, lifelong envatment, and 'nothing but envatment'. Recent envatment scenarios are a kind of 'local' sceptical scenario, whereas lifelong envatment and 'nothing but envatment' are global or radical sceptical scenarios that attack the very idea that anyone has ever had perceptual contact with an 'external' thing. She then goes on to show that local sceptical scenarios cannot by themselves motivate the 'global' variety, and that it is rather the implicit acceptance of the Reasons Identity Thesis—the thought that whether I am in the good case or in the bad case, my perceptual reasons are the same—which forces global sceptical scenarios upon one. The overarching aim of her paper is to motivate the idea that global scepticism is driven less by independently plausible

arguments and more by epistemic anxiety. By developing the Kierkegaardian insight that knowledge requires courage, she shows that we are not, as potential knowers, just passive recipients of a passing show of putatively veridical information, we also actively need to put ourselves in the way of it by learning to resist some very ingrained, but pernicious habits of thought: the Cartesian angst that we could be 'imprisoned' within our own representations and the Reasons Identity Thesis, which has us believe that our epistemic situation is always subjectively bad. Once the anxieties that ground these conceptions are exposed for what they are, it is possible to acquire the intellectual courage not to succumb to them.

Carter, in his paper on radical scepticism and the epistemology of confusion, imagines an 'obfuscating demon' who, rather than preying on our knowledge, makes us doubt our understanding of a particular subject-matter by causing us to become confused in various ways. The first way, which Carter calls 'wayward confusion', involves 'performative-grasping' (i.e., attempting to understand) inputs that are bad, the second, which he labels 'misguided confusion', is to grasp the wrong coherence and explanatory relations between inputs that are good, and the third, 'misapprehended confusion', is to have good inputs, successfully to grasp the right relations between them, but to do so incompetently. Carter then conjures a scenario where we are made to succumb to all three confusions at once, before going on to offer us his virtue perspectivist solution. This involves an ascent from understanding to reflective understanding, such that a thinker can gain a grasp of the grasp she has of what she understands, which then enables her to appreciate that her own grasp of the relevant subject-matter is reliable. Carter argues in externalist manner that as long as the thinker is in fact reliable at the second-order (whether she is aware of this reliability or not), this is sufficient for her to count as possessing a defence against the sceptical doubts targeting her performative-grasping. Of course this does not entail that the thinker is thereby rendered immune to the possibility of doubting herself, but then it would itself be a confusion, Carter believes, to think that such immunity is a necessary condition for understanding.

In the contribution that follows, Le Morvan defends a conception of scepticism inspired by Aristotle's doctrine of the mean. He starts off by situating his work against two dominant conceptions of scepticism prevalent in the contemporary literature: what Le Morvan calls 'the Foil' and 'Distraction Conceptions'. According to the former, scepticism is a theoretical problem that needs to be solved, while according to the latter, scepticism distracts us from more fruitful epistemological pursuits. Le Morvan steers clear of either option, preferring instead an account of scepticism that makes it more relevant to matters of public interest. Taking scepticism to be the attitude of withholding belief in

some claim (or set of claims), he defends a conceptual framework that treats scepticism as either an epistemic vice or an epistemic virtue. By vices and virtues Le Morvan means character traits that are manifested in habitual action, and that either promote the good (virtues), or undermine it (vices). Applied to scepticism, this means achieving a balance between the vice of excessive scepticism, while, at the same time, not falling prey to an equally vicious gullibility. Virtuous scepticism, in other words, strives to attain a mean between being too open to believing on the one hand and being too closed to believing on the other. Le Morvan then applies this conception to various real-life examples, before going on to defend it against a number of different objections.

In the final contribution, McGlynn examines Medina's account of socially-situated knowledge. He starts off by offering an account of the similarities and differences between Medina's conception and two other existing accounts of how social situation can bear on what subjects do and don't know: standpoint epistemology and epistemologies of active ignorance. Medina, according to McGlynn, presents his vice- and virtue-theoretic account as integrating the insights of both, but McGlynn argues that this is really not the case and that Medina's approach is distinct. McGlynn then goes on to develop Medina's suggestion that his conception of active ignorance reveals interesting analogues to traditional forms of scepticism. According to Medina, the epistemic vices of a dominant social group can share some characteristics with 'external world' scepticism: insofar as we can imagine a world entirely of an evil demon's making, so the epistemically narcissistic and arrogant can act as if they were themselves in the demon's position by refusing to acknowledge any other authoritative perspective except their own. Such an arrogant subject, on one version of McGlynn's reading, might, therefore, delusionally believe herself to have 'maker's knowledge' of the world. On a slightly different reading, which McGlynn regards as more plausible, the arrogant subject has lost all contact with how things stand in the world, while taking herself to be the only one who knows how things are. In this respect, the arrogant thinker's situation is similar to how things would be in a sceptical scenario: we believe ourselves to be 'in touch' with the world, but we are actually envatted brains and, hence, know nothing (or very little) about how things are. The moral that McGlynn draws from this is that we must guard against epistemic arrogance ourselves—for even if we think we are not guilty of this vice, we can never entirely rule out that we are the victims of our prejudices and biases.