

Some Thoughts on *Varieties of Skepticism* by James Conant and Andrea Kern (eds.)

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Conant, James and Kern, Andrea (eds.), *Varieties of Skepticism: Essays after Kant, Wittgenstein, and Cavell*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014, vi + 458 pp.

In current analytic epistemology, “external world skepticism” has come to mean just a small handful of arguments presented as intuitive problems in need of solution. This volume, by contrast, is a salutary reminder of the wide variety of skeptical problems, issues, and inquiries that can arise in various historical/philosophical contexts. It is not a specifically historical collection, however, but rather broaches a range of issues at the intersection of contemporary continental and analytic epistemology in response to (as the subtitle aptly puts it, these are “essays after”) Kant, Wittgenstein, and Stanley Cavell. As the editors comment, what unites these papers is a conviction “that a proper appreciation of the depth of the skeptical challenge must reveal it to be deeply disquieting, in the sense that ... skepticism threatens not just some set of theoretical commitments, but also – and fundamentally – our very

sense of self, world, and other; and ... that skepticism is the proper starting point for any serious attempt (a) to make sense of what philosophy is, and (b) to gauge the prospects of philosophical progress” (p.1).

The collection is divided into three parts, one for each of its three central figures. However, the essays in each part are not narrowly constrained in topic, and themes wind their way across the three parts. Wittgenstein’s thought about language and rules figures prominently, for instance, in the sections on Wittgenstein and Cavell, while questions about rationality and the structure of justification figure prominently in all three sections, as do questions about the critical potential of philosophy in relation to skeptical concerns. In fact, the layering, thematic resonances, and multiple concerns of these fourteen papers are impossible to bring out in a short review. I will accordingly

briefly summarize the content of the papers and then offer extended comments on two papers that I found particularly worthy of engagement.

The first section, essays “After Kant”, is concerned most significantly with the possibility of knowledge of the external world. In the only deeply historical essay in the section, Paul Franks explores three ways in which post-Kantian philosophers such as Jacobi and Maimon saw Kant not only as having failed to offer an adequate response to skepticism, but also as having opened the door to new forms of skeptical concern. The remaining essays in the section address, in various ways, the structure of empirical justification and the nature of empirical knowledge. Michael Williams explores a problem arising in Wilfrid Sellars’ attempt to find a way between foundationalism and coherentism: on Sellars’ view, the subject of a perceptual belief must know that her belief-forming mechanism is reliable, but this knowledge must itself ultimately be based on perceptual knowledge. Williams suggests that Sellars can perhaps have everything he wants if we accept that epistemic justification has a default-and-challenge structure. Andrea Kern, by contrast, suggests that justification bottoms out in perceptual claims about the world, claims whose positive justificatory status arises from the way in which their content arises from the very experiences that give rise to them (101-102); Kern thus argues that our

finitude is not fundamentally a limitation pertaining to the possibility of error (as the skeptic thinks), but rather a condition of the possibility of our thoughts having the empirical content that they have. In “Skepticism, Stroud, and the Contextuality of Knowledge”, Hilary Putnam offers a detailed critical reading of Stroud’s (1984 chapter 2) in order to bring out the strength of a contextualist view of epistemic language. Finally, Sebastian Rödl offers an intriguing account, to which I will return, of our ability to rule out all possibility of error with regard to our beliefs about the world.

The second section, “After Wittgenstein”, concerns – with one significant exception – issues related to rule-following and interpretation. Albrecht Wellmer explores the place of interpretation in our understanding of the meanings of others’ words, and he evaluates the prospects for a radical hermeneutic skepticism “concerning the possibility of mutual trust and sincerity among human beings” – “the possibility of undistorted communication” (210). In “Interpretation: Everyday and Philosophical”, Martin Stone charts a delightful course through our actual use of the notion of *interpretation* in a wide variety of ordinary contexts to bring out the important question of whether there is distortion involved in philosophical claims that purport to find interpretation at the heart of every linguistic exchange as the condition of the possibility of meaning or understanding as such. The ultimate

question here is whether the meaning of some things must be available without interpretation “if interpretation is to be possible at all” (215). Jason Bridges’ “Rule-Following Skepticism, Properly So Called”, concerns similar themes, offering an important reading of Kripke’s (1982) skeptical argument about meaning on which certain questions about *justification* take center stage. Cora Diamond’s paper, “The Hardness of the Soft: Wittgenstein’s Early Thought About Skepticism”, by contrast, returns us to themes concerning external world skepticism: Wittgenstein’s relation in his early Notebooks to Russell’s approach to external world skepticism and to related issues of philosophical method.

The third section, “After Cavell”, focuses upon the significance of our relations to others for the possibility of mutual linguistic intelligibility and indeed for contentful thought. The papers by Stephen Mulhall and Steven G. Affeldt comprise an illuminating discussion of the place of rules in Cavell’s conception of (Wittgenstein’s thought about) language. Christoph Menke reads *Hamlet* as tracing out a route to skepticism, highlighting the way in which the “attitude of reflective spectatorship” figures in Hamlet’s epistemic and practical paralysis. Arata Hamawaki’s essay, “Cavell, Skepticism, and the Idea of Philosophical Criticism”, returns us to external world skepticism by detailing Cavell’s complex accounting of the prospects for an “Ordinary

Language” criticism of skepticism. Here too consideration of Cavell’s thinking about language takes center stage. Finally, Simon Glendinning’s “Cavell and other Animals” leaves us with a tempting question: Cavell regards shared criteria (governing the application of our concepts of inner states) as fundamental to our understanding of others, but where does this leave the surprising degree to which there can be something like mutual psychological attunement and understanding between humans and non-human animals?

I turn now to more detailed consideration of two of the papers, both of which raise questions about what it would take to get external world skepticism going and what would constitute a satisfactory response.

In his striking paper “Finite Knowledge”, Sebastian Rödl considers a skeptical argument that runs:

1. “One knows something if and only if one is in a position to give sufficient grounds for it, that is, grounds that rule out that one is mistaken” (123).
2. “No matter what one’s grounds are, there is a possible circumstance such that, if it obtained, one’s grounds would not rule out that one is mistaken” (123).

Conclusion: “It is impossible to know anything” (123).

Rödl’s response is to deny the second premise. He claims that it incorrectly supposes that grounds for knowledge are “asituational” – that is, that one would have the same

grounds in both good cases and unfortunate ones (138-9). He proposes as an alternative that one knows such things as the color of one's house (even while one is away at the office for the day) by knowing general "sublunary" laws which are not merely reports of statistical frequencies, but rather laws characterizing how things go in general. For instance, one's grounds might be that one's house was off-white when one left, that in general people do not paint other people's houses unless hired or requested to do so, and that one did not hire or request anyone to paint one's house. What about the possibility that some prankster has, unbeknownst to one, painted one's house purple? If there is some reason to suspect such an occurrence, then one needs some additional grounds ruling it out. But in the absence of such reasons for doubt, this possibility is already ruled out by the "sublunary" law itself; one doesn't need any further, specific reasons for thinking that the law holds good in this case (133). In the good case, then, one's grounds are sufficient to rule out that one is mistaken: one knows a particular fact in this sort of case by drawing on knowledge of a general truth.

The basic outlines of Rödl's proposal are extremely appealing. It does seem that in the usual sort of circumstances I can rule out such possibilities of error as that the goldfinch might just be stuffed, or that the zoo might have disguised some mules to look like zebras, by knowing some general but not

exceptionless truths about what happens, what people do, and how the world works. At the same time, however, I fail to see how a view with this general structure entails denial of the skeptic's second premise. Regardless of whether there is no painting prankster or whether one spends her day happily painting my house, my grounds while at the office seem to be exactly the same: my house was off-white when I left, I have not hired or requested anyone to paint it, and in general people do not paint other people's houses unless hired or requested to do so. Those are all truths that I know in both the good case and the bad case. In the good case they suffice for knowledge; in the bad case they don't. Either way, my grounds themselves are the same; what is different is whether they would be adequate for knowledge.

Let's consider, then, what might be wrong with this particular skeptical argument. It seems to me that both premises are true. Its flaw is that they do not entail the conclusion. All one needs in order to block the conclusion is this thought: what is required in order for one's grounds to rule out that one is mistaken *depends upon the circumstances* (Austin 1979). Suppose that this thought is true. Then even if (as premise two asserts) there is a possible circumstance such that, if it obtained, these very same grounds would not rule out that one is mistaken, it still would be possible that one's grounds here and now, in *these* circumstances, rule out that one

is mistaken. It is true that one would not know in those other, unfortunate circumstances in which one's grounds don't rule out that one is mistaken, but this would leave wide open that in these rather different circumstances one's grounds would be perfectly sufficient for knowledge.

There are various ways of incorporating a thought along these lines into a developed epistemological theory. But here an important methodological choice-point arises. Notice that we don't *need* any particular epistemological theorizing in order to refute this skeptical argument. All that is needed – insofar as this skeptical argument aims to arise out of our ordinary epistemic commitments and practices – is to show that the thought highlighted in the preceding paragraph is supported by perfectly unexceptionable examples. Then we can grant that the skeptic's premises are both correct without any fear that we are thereby committed to a skeptical conclusion.

I have just staked a claim about how we might satisfactorily deal with certain sorts of skeptical arguments. A fundamental and difficult question arises here concerning the relation, in all its dimensions, between the motivations and aspirations of skeptical thought and the commitments of ordinary life. Arata Hamawaki's paper, "Cavell, Skepticism, and the Idea of Philosophical Criticism", offers an exemplary charting of these issues as they figure in Cavell's response to Cartesian-style external world skepticism. Hamawaki offers an

extended comparison between Cavell's treatment of skepticism and Kant's treatment of "transcendental illusion" in metaphysics, suggesting that Cavell's response, much like Kant's, offers a new way of conceiving of objectivity, rationality, and the conditions of contentful thought. On the way to this conclusion, however, Hamawaki focuses upon the details of Cavell's engagement with J. L. Austin's "Ordinary Language" criticisms of skepticism. Here I remain quite unsure that the heart of the issue has been reached.

Austin (1979) famously objected that standard skeptical arguments use words such as "know" in ways that do not accord with our ordinary procedures of inquiry and epistemic assessment. As Hamawaki recounts, Cavell is dissatisfied with this point. Since the skeptic is, like us, a master of our ordinary epistemic practices and terms of epistemic appraisal, this divergence won't strike the skeptic as news; the crucial questions are why the skeptic's inquiry diverges in just the ways it does, what motivations the skeptic has for these divergences, and whether this is an intelligible projection of our ordinary epistemic concepts into a new and distinctive setting. Hamawaki suggests that to vindicate the skeptic on this score, Cavell makes crucial use of the concept of a "generic object": when the skeptical epistemologist investigates whether s/he really knows that there is a tomato here, this isn't an ordinary investigation concerning, e.g., whether the object

has been properly identified; rather, the tomato is being treated as a stand-in, a representative, for materiality as such, and the question has become whether and how one knows that there is an external thing (of whatever sort) here at all. Once *that* question has been posed, the suggestion that one might be, e.g., merely dreaming becomes, Hamawaki suggests, both pressing but also impossible to refute. “[I]f a problem about knowing the generic object has presented itself, then it is not unreasonable to ask how we know the object, without having a special reason for raising the question in the particular circumstances. In particular, the possibility that one is now dreaming – remote as that possibility is – would constitute a fully legitimate challenge to a question regarding a generic object” (402). The suggestion is thus that it is precisely a question about knowing the existence of an object, conceived of as a “generic object”, that motivates the skeptic’s divergence from our ordinary procedures of epistemic assessment.

In the end Cavell questions whether there is really a knowledge claim here to be challenged, and this is where, on Hamawaki’s account, issues about objectivity, rationality, and the conditions of contentful thought come into play. I wonder, however, whether we need to go that far into philosophical theorizing in order to come to terms with this form of skepticism, and also whether Hamawaki’s Cavell has managed to

identify the crucial, decisive moment in the skeptical inquiry.

We are ordinarily entitled to make use of other things we know about the world when evaluating a given knowledge claim. The crucial first step in the skeptical argumentation has to be something that prevents us from doing that (Leite 2010). However, focusing upon knowledge of the existence of a “generic object” – which is what supposedly pulls us away from our ordinary epistemic practices – doesn’t actually have this effect. Suppose that at the beginning of the inquiry the Cartesian philosopher has in fact managed to make a knowledge claim, “I know that there is a tomato here”, where the claim is being understood as one about knowledge of an object conceived generically. The claim is, in effect, “I know that there is a bit of external materiality here before me now.” And suppose, too, that this quite properly invites the suggestion, “But mightn’t I just be dreaming?” Notice that the emphasis upon knowledge of the existence of a “generic object” doesn’t by itself put all of the rest of one’s knowledge of the world out of play. So one can, for all our focus upon knowledge of the existence of a bit of materiality here before me now, reply just as Austin suggested: by pointing out all of the ways in which one’s current experience is nothing like a dream (Austin 1964). And if it is suggested that perhaps one is having a dream which is entirely indistinguishable from waking experience, one can point out that such things don’t

happen to creatures like us in circumstances anything like these (Leite 2011). That is to say: focusing upon knowledge of the existence of a “generic object” doesn’t put in play what is needed to motivate the skeptic’s shift away from our ordinary confidence that we know all sorts of things about the world, nor indeed to motivate the sort of divergence from our ordinary procedures of epistemic assessment that the skeptic needs.

What crucially does the work here in Cartesian skepticism is some sort of initial move that places all of our background knowledge of the world out of reach for the purposes of the skeptical inquiry. An aspiration to evaluate our knowledge of the world all at once, at one fell swoop, would have such a consequence (as has been urged by Stroud (1984 chapter 3, 2000) and is also brought out by Paul Frank’s interesting discussion in this volume of the forms of skepticism that followed in the train of Kant’s critical philosophy). The thought that I would want to urge, however – and this is a thought that would be of a piece with Jason Bridges’ and Martin Stone’s discussions, in this volume, of rule-following skepticism and related issues – is that perhaps one does not need to enter into the high philosophical seas concerning objectivity, rationality, and the conditions of contentful thought in order to see what is wrong with such an aspiration. Perhaps the relation between skeptical thinking and ordinary life is rather such that

without engaging in philosophical theorizing at all, one can find good reason to keep one’s feet firmly on familiar ground.

Though limitations of space have allowed me to focus in detail on only two essays from this volume, it should be emphasized that this is a volume of unusual richness and breadth, and a useful complement to the more narrowly focused discussion in contemporary analytical epistemology. It contains many papers that deserve careful study and make lasting contributions.

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