

## **Scepticism**

syllabus

Central European University, Fall 2019

**1. Name of Course:** Scepticism

**2. Lecturer:** Daniel Kodaj

**3. No. of Credits and no. of ECTS credits:** 2 (4 ECTS)

**4. Semester:** Fall 2019

**5. Any other required elements of the departments:** none

**6. Course Level:** MA (elective), PhDs may attend

**7. Brief introduction to the course outlining its primary theme, objective and briefly the place of the course in the overall programme of study.**

The course offers an overview of contemporary responses to scepticism. We'll look at global scepticism as well as more localized challenges concerning our knowledge of other minds, modality, laws, and *a priori* truths.

**8. The goals of the course**

We tend to think that we possess a considerable amount of knowledge, both as individuals and as a species. Sceptical arguments aim to undermine this conviction. Sceptical challenges can be global (calling into question all or most of our purported knowledge) or local (challenging an important subset of our ordinary views, such as beliefs about other minds or the reliability of induction). For some philosophers, scepticism is a methodological tool that helps us uncover the real roots of, or the true character of, human knowledge; for others (arguably a minority), it is a substantive philosophical thesis that ought to humble everyone who reflects on the premises leading to it. The course offers an introduction to the contemporary varieties of scepticism and to the antidotes that are on sale.

**9. The learning outcomes of the course**

Students will master key concepts in the debate. They will become familiar with arguments for and against the contemporary anti-sceptical strategies, and, hopefully, they will develop their own take on the sceptical problematic.

**10. Week by week breakdown**

\* = optional reading

### **1 INTRODUCTION**

*In a nutshell, the sceptical challenge is the following:*

- (1) I don't know whether I'm in the Matrix.*
- (2) If I'm reading this syllabus, I'm not in the Matrix.*
- (3) I know the consequences of the things I know.*
- (4) So I don't know that I'm reading this syllabus.*

In week 1, we'll map the space of potential responses to this argument, and we'll relate them to upcoming topics.

no reading

## 2 DENYING CLOSURE

*One way to disarm the sceptic is to deny that we know the known consequences of our knowledge: If I know that P and I know that P entails Q, then I know that Q. If I know that there's a coin in my pocket and I know that coins are physical objects, then I know that there's a physical object in my pocket. The sceptic uses this principle when she concludes that she doesn't know that her experience is not illusory. (Roughly: Having hands entails not being a handless brain in a vat. So if I knew that I have hands, I would know that I'm not a BIV. But I don't know that I'm not a BIV, so I don't know that I have hands.)*

*If the principle of epistemic closure fails, then the sceptical argument is defused. Denying closure is advocated by many contemporary epistemologists, but others argue that the price is way too high (or that closure can even be proved from very intuitive axioms).*

Fred Dretske and John Hawthorne (2005): 'Is knowledge closed under known entailment?', in M. Steup and E. Sosa (eds), *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*.

\*Assaf Sharon and Levi Spectre (2017), 'Evidence and the openness of knowledge', *Philosophical Studies*.

## 3 CONTEXTUALISM

*Contextualists claim that the standards of knowledge shift from context to context. Ordinarily, we know that we have hands, that the Moon exists etc., even though, in the context of sceptical debates, we do not know these things. Scepticism undermines knowledge only if (and only as long as) we play the sceptical game.*

Keith DeRose (1994): 'Solving the sceptical puzzle', *Philosophical Review*.

\*Barry Stroud (1984): *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*, ch.2.

## 4 EXTERNALISM

*Externalists deny that we need to be aware of something that justifies our knowledge. To defeat the sceptic, externalists can give up closure, or they can deny that we don't know we're not in the Matrix. Perhaps we do know we're not in the Matrix, it's just that we don't know that we know. Is this a valid response to scepticism though?*

Ernest Sosa (1994): 'Philosophical scepticism and epistemic circularity', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*.

\*Barry Stroud (1994): 'Scepticism, "externalism", and the goal of epistemology', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*.

## 5 NEO-MOOREANISM

*“I can now give a large number of different proofs [of the existence of things outside of us], each of which is a perfectly rigorous proof; and that at many other times I have been in a position to give many others. I can prove now, for instance, that two human hands exist. How? By holding up my two hands, and saying, as I make a certain gesture with the right hand, 'Here is one hand', and adding, as I make a certain gesture with the left, 'and here is another'. And if, by doing this, I have proved ipso facto the existence of external things, you will all see that I can also do it now in numbers of other ways: there is no need to multiply examples.”*  
*This is Moore's infamous argument against the sceptic. Can this strategy work?*

James Pryor (2000): 'The skeptic and the dogmatist', *Noûs*.

\*Roger White (2006): 'Problems for dogmatism', *Philosophical Studies*.

## 6 PHENOMENALISM

*Phenomenalists think that physical objects are not real -- they exist only by abstraction from our sensory experience. This hypothesis undercuts scepticism about the external world. But is it worth the price?*

Robert Smithson (2017): 'A new epistemic argument for idealism', in K. Pearce and T. Goldschmidt (eds), *Idealism: New Essays in Metaphysics*.

\*Margaret Atherton (2018): 'Berkeley and skepticism', in D.E. Machuka and B. Reed (eds), *Skepticism from Antiquity to the Present*.

## 7 STRUCTURALISM

*The structuralist response to scepticism is a generalization of the phenomenalists response. The idea is that we do know a great deal about the world even in sceptical scenarios, because we are familiar with the functional/dynamical structure of our environment.*

David Chalmers (2019): 'Structuralism as a response to skepticism', *Journal of Philosophy*.

## 8 DREAMS

*A famous version of the sceptical challenge alleges that our life could be just a dream. Ernest Sosa argues that the phenomenology of dreams undermines dream scepticism.*

Ernest Sosa (2005): 'Dreams and philosophy', *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*.

\*Jonathan Ichikawa (2008): 'Scepticism and the imagination model of dreaming', *The Philosophical Quarterly*.

## 9 OTHER MINDS

*“When looking from a window and saying I see men who pass in the street, I really do not see them, but infer that what I see is men [...]. And yet what do I see from the window but hats and coats which may cover automatic machines?”*  
*(Descartes: 2nd meditation)*

Anil Gomes (2011): 'Is there a problem of other minds?', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*.

\*Joel Smith (2010): 'Seeing other people', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.

## 10 INDUCTION

*Do we know that the laws of physics will continue to hold tomorrow?*

Samir Okasha (2001): 'What did Hume really show about induction?', *The Philosophical Quarterly*.

Colin Howson (2000): *Hume's Problem: Induction and the Justification of Belief*, ch.3.

## 11 A PRIORI

*Do we have mathematical knowledge? Do we know that modus ponens is valid?*

James R. Beebe (2011): 'A priori skepticism', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.

\*Laurence Bonjour / Michael Devitt (2005): 'Is there a priori knowledge?', in M. Steup and E. Sosa (eds), *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*.

## 12 MODALITY

*We appeal to alleged possibilities and necessities all the time in philosophy. (Thought experiments crucially depend on intuitions about what is or is not possible.) Do we have any reason to think that our modal judgments are reliable?*

Peter van Inwagen (1998): 'Modal epistemology', *Philosophical Studies*.

\*Timothy Williamson (2007): 'Knowledge of metaphysical modality', in *The Philosophy of Philosophy*.

### 11. Assessment:

30% in-class presentation of one of the readings

70% essay (cca. 2000 words)

### 12. Other details:

Assessment deadlines: TBC

Contact: dkodaj@gmail.com