

Introduction

Scepticism is the doctrine that little or nothing is known or rationally believed or the object of justified belief. And a boring enough doctrine it is, unless the sceptic can somehow show that his sense of 'knowledge', 'rationality' or 'justification' is our sense also, or would be our sense if there were more of the truth in what we believed. Really to disturb us, he must reveal something which would make us go on hopelessly wanting to apply his cognitive concepts no matter what we were reminded of by the most faithful delineation of common sense. It is his failure to engage in this way with our actual or potential desires, the privacy and arbitrariness of his claims about what knowledge or rationality essentially is, that makes us tire so quickly with the sceptic as currently portrayed in the epistemological handbooks. The knowledge we have so little of turns out to be knowledge merely of propositions whose truth follows logically from the fact that they are believed, or knowledge of necessary truths, or absolute certainty. Easily persuaded of the artificiality of these standards, we turn away, grateful for the reminder of how different mathematics is from empirical science.

There is however a quite different sceptical doctrine, not obviously dependent on the inapplicability of some artificially demanding cognitive concept, and towards which anyone who has tried to disentangle recent debates on foundations and coherence theories of justification must have felt at least some passing attraction. It is that for much of what we believe an infinite regress of justification is both necessary and impossible. May it not be that we do actually want a justified belief impossible to possess unless justificatory regression can somehow be brought to a stop? Are we not perhaps also liable on reflection to want a justified belief which, though not requiring absolute certainty or incorrigibility in the stopping-place, does nevertheless require a non-arbitrary terminus hardly ever possible to reach? In what follows I try to articulate a version of

this regressive sceptical doctrine, and to support it with the strongest arguments I am able to construct.

'Radical assurance' will be my label for the species of justified believing power to gain which we are I think liable so often to want in vain. Three logically necessary conditions for being radically assured of the truth of a proposition are that you have assured yourself of its truth by a conscious and deliberate activity of investigation, that you are aware of the nature of this investigation, and that the proposition in question is actually true. One method of gaining assurance of a proposition's truth would be consciously to affirm that some other particular proposition is evidence for its truth, and consciously to affirm that other proposition itself. Your assurance would then be evidential. Another method might be somehow simply to investigate the proposition's own content without considering whether any other proposition is evidence for its truth. Your assurance would then be intuitive. But however your assurance is reached it will not be radical unless you reach it by a deliberate activity of investigation and have a certain insight into the nature of that activity. Additionally, radical assurance is in a certain sense regressive. It is logically necessary that if you are radically and evidentially assured that p , then you are also radically assured not only of the truth of the further proposition that you believe to be evidence for p , but also of the proposition that this further proposition *is* evidence for p .

My first thesis is that the scope of radical assurance is very severely limited by these various necessary conditions. From their conjunction with certain plausible psychological contingencies, it follows that you are radically assured that p only if one or other of the following three further conditions is satisfied. (1) p is self-evident, i.e. true and such that its truth can be in a certain sense metaphorically seen. (2) p is in a certain way evidentially related to a self-evident proposition. (3) An infinite regress of assurance is possible. But no such regress is possible, and even if there were propositions whose truth was seeable in the requisite metaphorical sense, there would not be enough of them for the other two conditions to be very often satisfied.

My second thesis is that although radical assurance is not something you actually aim for in ordinary daily or even scientific investigations, you are nevertheless liable, in other circumstances, to want much more radical assurance, or much more extensive powers

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to gain it, than you can ever actually possess. You are liable, when reflecting about your belief-system as a whole, to want radical assurance of the truth of all those propositions you believe whose truth-value you do not find a matter of indifference. And you are liable, when reflecting on the traditional problem of the sources of knowledge, to want the power to be radically assured of the truth of many of the kinds of propositions which outer-sensory experience has non-radically assured you of. The point here is not that sensory assurance leaves genuine doubts about 'the external world' which only radical assurance is powerful enough to remove, but that you are not sure that the power to gain that radical assurance would not be an inevitable concomitant of the power to resolve quite other and more genuine doubts about what precise varieties of knowledge-yielding experience we actually enjoy.

Thirdly, there is the question of consolation. Scepticism about radical assurance is, as I said, not just another altar to the incorrigible, not something you can be deflected from by the simple reminder of how much lower our ordinary standards really are. Necessarily, p is true if you are radically assured that p . But you can be radically assured that p without p 's following from the proposition that you believe p , and radically and evidentially assured that p is true without having conclusive evidence for its truth. p may also itself be a proposition to the effect that some other proposition is no more than probably true. Nor do I see any reason to suppose that the desire for radical assurance which philosophical reflection is liable to generate or reveal will vanish completely on the further realisation that it can hardly ever be satisfied. It is however worth asking whether we can assure ourselves that things would really have been better if our power to gain radical assurance had been less limited. We cannot be *radically* assured that things would have been no better, or not at any rate unless the scope of self-evidence is very much broader than most people are seriously prepared to believe. But I will show that if you are lucky enough to have certain other beliefs, then even on modest assumptions about the scope of self-evidence, your belief that things would have been no better can as it happens be an assurance almost as satisfactory as the radical kind. And if you are not lucky in this way, certain further more or less recondite crumbs of consolation may still remain.

Chapter 1 is about the nature of radical assurance. Chapter 2 explains the restrictions on its scope. My arguments about our

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-10793-8 - Evidence and Assurance
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Excerpt
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liability to want radical assurance or the power to get it come in Chapter 3. In Chapter 4 I relate my scepticism to current doctrines about how to terminate or circumvent an infinite regress of justification. Chapter 5 is about arguments to the effect that many contingent propositions must be in some sense knowable or capable of justified acceptance if any sentence is meaningful, or any proposition believed. I try to make sure that such arguments cannot be adapted to show that my assumptions about the restricted scope of radical assurance are exaggerated or unintelligible. In Chapters 6 and 7 I look at the relations between scepticism about radical assurance and some familiar and ostensibly more limited forms of scepticism about ethics and induction. Chapter 8 is on the question of consolation.

But before beginning in earnest, and confronting you with the rather complex apparatus on which my subsequent arguments depend, there are one or two possible misunderstandings worth trying to anticipate.

In the first place, pessimism about the scope of radical assurance will probably not entail pessimism about the scope of knowledge. It may very well be that some knowing amounts to no more than a causal relation between the believer and the object of his belief and requires no conscious activity of investigation or inference on the believer's part. In this case there can be knowledge without any kind of assurance, radical or otherwise. But if I am right in thinking that an extensive power to gain radical assurance is something we are anyway liable to want, then doubts about whether this is something we can ever possess will not be any the less disturbing for their failure to entail corresponding doubts about our power to know. Causal theories of knowledge do not abolish volitional and regressive difficulties – they merely transfer them to a different department of philosophy.

I said that what limits our power to gain radical assurance is that when p is not self-evident we cannot be radically assured of its truth unless a regress of assurance is terminable in the believing of a self-evident proposition which is evidentially related to p . Surely this is to embrace the implausibilities of a *foundations* theory of justification? Why have I not grasped that whether a man is justified in believing a proposition depends on the *coherence* of this proposition with the other propositions which he believes? I shall argue, in Chapter 4, that this objection rests on a failure to distinguish be-

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tween the conditions under which a man can assure himself that a proposition is true, and the conditions under which one proposition is evidence for another proposition, where ‘ q is evidence for p ’ means, on the roughest possible preliminary approximation, that when a proposition like q is true so usually at least is a proposition like p . I do not deny that there are concepts of coherence such that if q is a proposition to the effect that p belongs to a coherent set of propositions, then q is evidence for p . But if a man aims to *assure* himself that p is true by affirming as evidence a proposition about p ’s membership of a coherent set, then the question arises of whether he will not also want to assure himself that this proposition about p ’s set-membership is true. And if he affirms some further proposition as evidence for the proposition about p ’s set-membership he may also want to assure himself in turn that this further proposition is true. An infinite regress threatens, and no theory concerned only with evidential relations between propositions will show us how to avoid it. ‘Foundations theory of assurance’ would be a useful enough name for the view, which I accept, that the regress must be terminable if we are to have the sort of assurance we are liable to want or liable to want the power to gain. But there would be no incompatibility, on that definition, between a foundations theory of assurance and a coherence theory of evidence. Confusion arises because of the multiplicity of uses to which ‘justification’ and its cognates are currently put. We talk of one proposition’s justifying another, meaning that the first proposition supports or is evidence for the second. We talk also of a man’s being justified in believing a proposition. This may mean merely that he has that right or entitlement to believe a proposition which derives from its being at least probably true, or alternatively that right to believe it which derives from the fact that his believing it would be by some decision-theoretic standard better than not believing it. But it may also mean something which entails that he has deliberately *done* something to assure himself that the proposition is true or that his believing it meets the decision-theoretic standard. The terminology of ‘justified belief’ is as chaotic as the terminology of ‘rational belief’ and ‘rational action’.

But now, given that we must at any rate terminate a regress of assurance, why exactly should it be supposed that this is something we are so rarely able to do? And what in particular of the familiar stopping-places of foundational epistemology – beliefs justified by

sense-experience, self-justifying beliefs, beliefs for which justification is simply not needed? The first two options are eliminated, as I will argue, if justified belief is taken to be an assurance of truth gained through a deliberate and self-conscious activity of investigation. For consciousness of the nature of one's sensory assurance transmutes it into an affirmation of evidence. And it cannot follow logically from the fact that you believe something that you have conducted an active investigation into its truth-value. The 'no-need' theory is stricken by a different ambiguity: can we ask 'Not needed for what?', or does 'not needed' mean simply 'not good actually to have'?

Another likely objection is that scepticism about radical assurance defeats itself. I have already promised to answer one version of this charge, namely that it is a condition for the meaningfulness of any sentence or for any proposition to be believed that radical assurance has more scope than I am prepared to assume. But there is another way in which my contentions could seem self-defeating. If there are no self-evident propositions, or too few of them for us to have a power of radical assurance as extensive as we are liable to want, then how can there be enough self-evident propositions for me radically to assure myself that even my own sceptical theses are true? How can I be radically assured that we really are liable to want a belief-system in which every proposition believed is one of whose truth we have radical assurance? How can I be radically assured that the impossibility of an infinite regress of assurance makes radical assurance dependent on the scope of self-evidence, or even that the scope of self-evidence is as limited as I say it is?

But I do not advance these theses about radical assurance because I believe that I can radically assure myself of their truth. I advance them because I believe them, want you to believe them, and believe that you will believe them if you follow my arguments. Since you are liable to believe that some though not many propositions are self-evident, it is worth trying to show that, on what I take to be typically modest assumptions about the scope of self-evidence, it is possible radically to assure oneself that some of my theses are true, and in particular that we can be radically assured of the impossibility of an infinite regress of evidential assurance. But I do not claim that modest assumptions about the scope of self-evidence would allow us to be radically assured that these same assumptions are ever actually made, or that radical assurance is something we are liable to

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want. Nor do I claim that we can be radically assured of the truth of any proposition to the effect that some particular proposition categorically is or is not self-evident or one of whose truth we can be radically assured. It is not even essential to my position that there actually *are* any self-evident propositions. If there were none at all, then my theses about radical assurance could still be true. They would then all be in the same position that only some of them would be in if typically modest assumptions about the scope of self-evidence were true.

Finally, the talk of consolation may have struck you as a trifle theatrical. Surely the answer lies simply in the unavoidable self-assertion of nature and common sense? No one can actually succeed in living like Pyrrho, in the absurd description of Montaigne: ‘dull and impassive, adopting a surly and unsociable way of life, getting in the way of jostling carts, defying precipices, refusing to obey the laws’. There are forms of scepticism to which this objection does apply, but they do not include scepticism about radical assurance. To deny that you can be radically assured that p is not to deny p , or even to claim that not believing p is a psychological possibility. I nowhere encourage the ‘Cartesian’ thought of a man contracting the body of what he believes until it coincides with what he can immediately validate and then trying desperately to expand it again, according to the rule that nothing should be accepted which is not self-evidently derivable from that basis. It is not common-sense propositions about chairs and tables and precipices that we are not to believe, but optimistic philosophical propositions about the attainability of our potential cognitive desires. ‘La raison confond les dogmatiques, et la nature confond les pyrrhoniens.’

I

The nature of radical assurance

Radical assurance lies somewhere in the wild medley of things you might talk of in saying that a belief is rational or justified. And one relatively easy step towards its location is to mark off a form of rationally believing p whose rationality is contingent upon your also believing certain propositions about the relations between the values of the possible outcomes of your believing p and the values of the possible outcomes of your not believing p . It helps to contrast rational belief of this kind – I will call it consequentially rational belief – with the generic assurance of which radical assurance is one particular species. You assure yourself that p , on my stipulation at any rate, only if you satisfy yourself of its truth by a conscious and deliberate investigation of its truth-value. And that you have assured yourself that p neither entails nor is entailed by the proposition that you are consequentially rational in believing p . I will say something about consequentially rational belief and its relations with assurance of truth in section (1) of this chapter. And there will be more details about assurance itself in section (2). After distinguishing there between evidential and experiential modes of assurance and dealing in some detail with the experiential mode, I move on in section (3) to a correspondingly detailed discussion of the evidential mode. By section (4) I am able finally to define radical assurance, and to contrast it with knowledge and the chaos of ‘justified belief’. The preliminaries are completed in section (5) which contains more about radical assurance of the non-evidential kind.

(1) *Consequentially rational belief*

The old man is in no position actually to find out whether or not his housekeeper is honest but he does think that in his present precarious emotional state, it will be dangerous for everyone if he believes that she is not, or even if he does not believe that she is. This makes

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it consequentially rational for him to believe that she is honest. You are consequentially rational in believing p if you believe a certain proposition about the relations between the values of the possible outcomes of your believing p and values of the possible outcomes of your not believing p . And this proposition about outcomes is the proposition you must believe in order to be rational in the action of getting yourself to believe p . If it is consequentially rational for the old man to believe that his housekeeper is honest, then it is rational for him to do what he can to make himself believe that she is. And that course of action is rational because of what he believes about the outcomes of his believing and not believing her honest.

In ordinary usage, a rational action can be either an action for which the agent believes that there is a reason, or an action for which the agent believes correctly that there is a reason, or an action for which there is a reason, even though the agent does not believe that there is. We could mark the distinctions by talking of subjectively, objectively and unconsciously rational action. For the purpose of defining consequentially rational belief, I neglect unconsciously rational action, and assume that it is a necessary condition for you to be rational in doing something that you believe that there is a reason to do it. But we can if we like distinguish between subjective and objective modes of consequentially rational belief. The old man's belief that his housekeeper is honest will be consequentially rational in the objective mode only if he was right about how dangerous it would have been for him not to have believed this, only if he was correct in thinking that there was a reason for him to get himself to believe that she was honest. And his belief will be consequentially rational in the subjective mode if his calculation, though deliberate and explicit, was nevertheless based on a mistake: there was nothing very precarious about his emotional state, no danger in his not believing that she was honest.

But now, undercutting these niceties, you will probably object that there is something paradoxical about applying *any* notion of rationality to the enterprise of deliberately setting out to end up with a belief. Suppose that a man, believing his son dead, decides in his misery to be hypnotised into believing that the boy is still alive. An objection to this kind of project, according to Bernard Williams, is

that there is no end to the amount you have to pull down. It is like a revolutionary movement trying to extirpate the last remains of the *ancien régime*. The man gets rid of this belief about his son, and then there is some belief which strongly implies that his son is dead, and that has to be got rid of. Then there is another belief which could lead his thoughts in the undesired direction, and that has to be got rid of. It might be that a project of this kind tended in the end to involve total destruction of the world of reality.¹

We might of course reply that the danger of being involved in an endless extirpation of evidence is precisely one of those possible outcomes of believing *p* which the consequentially rational man should consider in deciding whether or not it is better to do what results in his believing *p*. But apart from that, and more importantly, there is a distinction between setting out to believe something, and setting out to believe what you already know to be false. It does not follow from your being consequentially rational in believing *p*, as I defined it, that you antecedently knew that *p* was false; nor indeed does it follow that *p* is the sort of proposition which you ever will or even could have convincing evidence either for or against.

Williams does however have a further doubt. He presents this as a reason for its not being a contingent fact that I cannot bring it about, just like that, that I believe something, as it is a contingent fact 'that I cannot bring it about, just like that, that I'm blushing'. But if what he says here is true, it will I think also show that there is something paradoxical even in more roundabout methods of deliberately getting yourself to end up with a belief.

If in full consciousness I could will to acquire a 'belief' irrespective of its truth, it is unclear that before the event I could seriously think of it as a belief, i.e. as something purporting to represent reality. At the very least, there must be a restriction on what is the case after the event; since I could not then, in full consciousness, regard this as a belief of mine, i.e. something I take to be true, and also know that I acquired it at will . . . But if I can acquire beliefs at will I must know that I am able to do this: and how could I know that I was capable of this feat, if with regard to every feat of this kind which I had performed I necessarily had to believe that it had not taken place?²

¹ Williams (1973) p. 151

² Williams (1973) p. 148