Global Scepticism Refuted? A Reply to Gemes

Tim Kraft

Did Gemes refute global scepticism in “A refutation of global scepticism” (2009)? I do not think so. Far from refuting global scepticism his argument rather exposes a misunderstanding of the role of sceptical scenarios. Contrary to what Gemes assumes, sceptical scenarios are not error-possibilities, but ignorance-possibilities. In the end Gemes’ “refutation” does not affect the force of sceptical arguments at all.¹

At the heart of Gemes’ paper lies a counterexample to the claim that all of one’s experience-based beliefs could be false:

(1) I have a hand.

(2) It is not the case that I have a hand with a wart on it. (2009: 219)

Since the negation of (2) logically implies (1), only one of the two beliefs can be false. Both beliefs are obviously based on experience. Thus, not all of one’s experience-based beliefs can be false.² With his example Gemes is successful in establishing what I shall call Gemes’ theorem: At least one of one’s experience-based beliefs must be true.

To begin with stating the obvious, scepticism is the thesis that I do not know anything based on experience or that no experience-based belief is justified. But proving that at least one of my experience-based beliefs is true implies neither that I know at least one proposition from experience nor that I am justified in believing at least one proposition on the basis of experience. So what does Gemes’ theorem have to do with scepticism?

Although the title promises a refutation of scepticism, what Gemes claims in the body of the paper is more modest: He merely claims that “the possibilities that one is dreaming, or is being deceived by a deceitful demon, or is a brain in a vat, do not show that it is possible that all one’s experience-based beliefs are false” (2009: 219). Thus, what Gemes’ paper is really concerned with is the question of what sceptical scenarios do and what

¹It was suggested to me that Gemes probably meant his paper as a joke, not as a serious proposal on how to deal with scepticism. If you think so too, you are invited to read my paper not as criticism, but as an attempt to spell out the lesson that can be learned from that joke.

²Another example is Olaf Müller’s there are animals – there are no unicorns (2003: 47). The examples differ only insofar as Müller’s example rests on a conceptual truth, namely that all unicorns are animals. Full disclosure: I am credited by Olaf Müller for drawing his attention to the fact that not all of one’s beliefs can be false. But note that he does not draw the same consequences as I do, see fn. 4.
they do not show. According to Gemes, sceptical scenarios are presented with the aim of illustrating the possibility of global error, but fail to achieve this.

What is the point of sceptical scenarios? What are they meant to illustrate? Let us have a look at some ordinary experience-based beliefs and what happens to them when one is the victim of a sceptical scenario.

1. Some experience-based beliefs are true *ex hypothesi*. Their truth follows directly from the description of the sceptical scenario. In the scenario of the brain in a vat e.g. *I have a brain, electrons have negative charge, there are no unicorns* remain as true as ever. Note that this is not an artefact of that particular scenario. It is of the nature of a sceptical scenario that it provides an explanation of why the victim believes what she does. It is not plausible that both the victim of the sceptical scenario and someone living in a world that is more or less the way she believes it to be have the same beliefs unless some story or other is told about the sources of these beliefs. Whatever the details of that story, some beliefs turn out to be true in both situations. Therefore, beliefs that remain true in the sceptical scenario can simply be read off of the description of the scenario.

2. Some experience-based beliefs are vacuously true. This includes universally quantified propositions and material conditionals with a false antecedent. Examples are *cats are furry, lemons are sour* or *if I go to a party tonight, I won’t be in bed before midnight*. Since there are no cats, lemons or parties in the sceptical scenario, all these beliefs turn out to be true.

3. Some experience-based beliefs are neither true nor false. This includes many beliefs whose content is a singular proposition. If I was a brain in a vat, *Anne is a doctor, Sarkozy is the present president of France, this is a tree*, and so on would be neither true nor false. In the possible world in which I am a brain in a vat “Anne”, “Sarkozy”, “France” are empty names and “this” a non-referring demonstrative. On the most plausible semantics of empty singular terms these beliefs are neither true nor false.\(^3\)

4. Some experience-based beliefs are necessarily true. Many apriori truths are necessary. Although they can be known apriori, they need not be justified non-empirically. Many examples can be used to illustrate this. Here is one in which a tautology is believed because of an experience: Looking at the mist I mutter “A dog is coming towards me... or it isn’t”. Some seconds after acquiring the belief I notice that it is a tautology. For a short period of time I believed a tautology on the basis of an experience.

To sum up, in a sceptical scenario some experience-based beliefs are true because of the nature of the scenario, some are vacuously true, some are neither true nor false and some are necessarily true. These beliefs do not form a small, negligible subset of

---

\(^3\)If you prefer an account of empty singular terms that does not have this consequence, note that it suffices for my argument that a sceptic is not committed to a view of empty singular terms according to which sentences with empty singular terms have a truth-value. The force of scenario-based sceptical arguments does not depend on the semantics of empty singular terms.
one’s experience-based beliefs. Moreover, they clearly fall within the scope of sceptical arguments. Thus, mere reflection on examples of experience-based beliefs shows that there is something wrong with the idea that sceptical scenarios are meant to illustrate the possibility of global error. If sceptical scenarios were meant to accomplish this, they would obviously be inadequate for their task. Charity requires us to understand sceptical scenarios not as dealing with the possibility of global error.

But what do they illustrate if it is not global error? Although the victim of a sceptical scenario has a lot of true beliefs, she is nevertheless ignorant about all these matters. She is ignorant, because her beliefs are somehow or other unfounded. What I have a hand, I have a brain, electrons have negative charge, Anne is a doctor, cats are furry etc. have in common is the absence of a causal link to the relevant object(s), i.e. my hand, my brain, electrons, Anne, cats. The link can be missing because the object does not exist (e.g. my hand, Anne, cats) or because the link is not of the sort necessary for knowledge (e.g. electrons, my brain). Hence, a sceptical scenario is not defective if it does not illustrate the possibility of global error. It is enough to illustrate the possibility of global ignorance. To be successful it has to illustrate the possibility of global ignorance.

So far I have argued that sceptical scenarios are misunderstood if one thinks of them as error-possibilities. Interestingly, however, Gemes claims that what I claim to be a misunderstanding is a “widespread view” (2009: 219). It is indeed striking how often sceptical scenarios are described in terms of error and false belief. Hence, my claim would be more plausible if I could offer a diagnosis of why it is tempting to think that sceptical scenarios are error-possibilities although they are not.

It is common nowadays to present scenario-based sceptical arguments in the form of the so-called argument from ignorance (DeRose 1995: 1). This argument relies on two premisses. In a first step, which gives the argument its name, it is argued that I do not know that I am not in a sceptical scenario, e.g. in the brain in a vat scenario. In a second step it is argued that if I do not know that I am not a brain in a vat none of my experience-based beliefs constitutes knowledge. It follows that I do not know anything based on experience. I restrict discussion to the second premiss. Since it is not self-evident, an argument is needed for that premiss. The easiest way to argue for it is to bring the closure of knowledge (under known implication) into play: If one knows that \( P \) and also knows that \( \neg Q \) logically implies \( P \), one knows that \( Q \) as well. Hence, (given that one knows

---

4One might reply on Gemes’ behalf that his example is a better argument for this thesis than my list above. But, as Gemes notes in his second footnote, the sceptic can neutralise Gemes’ objection by a simple move: He only needs to restrict his scepticism to a suitable subset of all of one’s experience-based beliefs. This is not an \textit{ex post} rationalisation. Müller actually adopts this strategy on the sceptic’s behalf in his 2003: 44-49, esp. 47. Müller’s proposal is to make it true by stipulation that sceptical arguments deal only with a class of beliefs for which Gemes’ theorem is false. Let \( S \) be the largest subset of propositions believed by me on the basis of experience such that for all \( P \in S \) there is no \( Q \in S \) such that \( \neg Q \) logically implies \( P \). It is not easy to find out how large this set \( S \) is exactly, but for the sceptic’s purposes it suffices that \( S \) is large enough. Hence, what is wrong with the idea that sceptical scenarios are error-possibilities is not that it overlooks Gemes’ theorem, but that it misinterprets the nature of sceptical scenarios.

5Or closure’s close cousin, the principle of excluded error-possibilities. According to this principle, one knows that \( P \) only if one can eliminate all possibilities in which \( \neg P \) is the case.
that being a brain in a vat implies not having a hand) one can only know that one has a hand, if one knows that one is not a brain in a vat. It is attractive to rely on closure here, because closure is, at least prima facie, a very plausible principle. Unfortunately, relying on closure has one crucial disadvantage: The template works only for experience-based beliefs that are indeed false when one is a brain in a vat. As we have seen, it is far from obvious that a large set of beliefs fulfills this condition. Although it is fulfilled by the ever so popular example *I have a hand*, it is not even fulfilled by *I don’t have more than two hands*. So, the reason why it is attractive to understand sceptical scenarios as error-possibilities is that this is required for the closure template to be cogent. Failing to see an alternative to invoking closure as a justification for the second premiss, one rather misunderstands sceptical scenarios.

There is an alternative answer to the question of why I do not know anything based on experience if I do not know that I am not a brain in a vat. The distinction between non-epistemic and epistemic defeaters is useful here. A belief can be defeated either by a reason that speaks in favour of the falsity of what is believed or by a reason that speaks against the reliability, responsibility or trustworthiness of the believer or the belief-forming process. The first kind of defeaters are non-epistemic defeaters, the second kind are epistemic defeaters. What distinguishes them is that if a non-epistemic defeater successfully defeats a belief, nothing about the truth of what is believed follows. A second distinction is needed to account for sceptical defeaters. Usually what is offered as a defeater is not a mere possibility. To give an example, suppose you believe that Anna was in town yesterday. In that case, *Anna was hundreds of miles away that day* is a non-epistemic defeater, *you are too shortsighted to recognise faces over such a distance without glasses* is an epistemic defeater. Both defeaters consist in more than presenting a mere possibility. I shall call them standard defeaters in contrast to modal defeaters. In the example, *she might have been hundreds of miles away* is a non-epistemic modal defeater and *you may be shortsighted* is an epistemic modal defeater. What kind of defeaters are sceptical scenarios? If any, they are epistemic modal defeaters. They are more like *but you may be shortsighted* than like *but your belief might be false*. Hence, if the argument from ignorance is to be successful, the sceptic has to argue that one does not know anything from experience if there is an uneliminated epistemic modal defeater, i.e. if one cannot rule out being in an ignorance-possibility. If the role of sceptical scenarios is to wipe away all experience-based beliefs at once, the sceptic has to rely on something stronger than closure. To pave the way for a better understanding of sceptical arguments, we should forget once and for all that sceptical scenarios are error-possibilities; they are ignorance-possibilities.

---

6The distinction between two kinds of defeaters is implicit in Stroud’s discussion of the goldfinch example vs. the Cleveland example (1984: 24-26). It is explicitly drawn under various names by e.g. Pollock&Cruz (1999: 196, rebutting/undercutting), Williams (2001: 149, non-epistemic/epistemic) and Casullo (2003: 44-46, overriding/undermining).

7Of course, this does not imply that closure-based arguments are unsuccessful with respect to single beliefs. But usually the role of scenario-based sceptical arguments is to defeat a large set of beliefs at once.
References