

## *Why scepticism about self-knowledge is self-undermining*

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In Ebbs 1996 and 2001 I explained why I believe that a certain sort of argument that seems to support scepticism about self-knowledge is actually incoherent, or self-undermining. Anthony Brueckner has recently tried to show that even if the central premisses of my explanation are true, the sceptical argument in question is not self-undermining. He has also suggested that even if the sceptical argument is self-undermining, it can still serve as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the assumption that we have self-knowledge. My goal here is to explain why I think neither of these responses is successful.

### 1. *The sceptical argument*

I will begin by reconstructing the sceptical argument whose coherence is in question. The argument is designed to show that we cannot know without empirical investigation what thoughts our utterances express. Consider our assumption that we each know without empirical investigation that our sincere utterances of ‘There is water in the basement’ express the thought that there is water in the basement. To begin with, the sceptic relies on standard Twin Earth thought experiments to support contrasting pairs of sentences about what thoughts our utterances of ‘There is water in the basement’ would express in different possible worlds. He relies on Twin Earth thought experiments to show, for instance, that we each must accept the following two sentences:

- (1) In a possible world in which I am a denizen of water-filled Earth, my sincere utterances of ‘There is water in the basement’ express the thought that there is water in the basement.
- (2) In a possible world in which I am a denizen of twin-water-filled Twin-Earth, my sincere utterances of ‘There is water in the basement’ express the thought that there is twin-water in the basement.

According to the sceptic, the Twin Earth thought experiments that support (1) and (2) show that we each must accept that

- (3) I know that if my sincere utterances of ‘There is water in the basement’ express the thought that there is water in the basement, then my sincere utterances of ‘There is water in the basement’ do not express the thought that there is twin-water in the basement.

The sceptic also assumes that we each accept a general closure principle:

- (4) If I know that  $p$  and I know that if  $p$  then  $q$ , then I know that  $q$ .<sup>1</sup>

Premises (3) and (4) together imply

- (5) If I know that my sincere utterances of ‘There is water in the basement’ express the thought that there is water in the basement, then I know that my sincere utterances of ‘There is water in the basement’ do not express the thought that there is twin-water in the basement.

Note that (1)–(5) do not imply that I do not know without empirical investigation that my sincere utterances of ‘There is water in the base-

<sup>1</sup> In my previous reconstructions of the sceptic’s reasoning I left the closure principle unstated. Brueckner points out the need for the closure principle in Brueckner 2003a: 42, n. 2. He states a closure principle like (4) in Brueckner 2003b: 186.

ment' express the thought that there is water in the basement. To get to this conclusion, we need some reason to think that without empirical investigation we cannot rule out that we are in a possible world (such as the one described by (2)) in which our sincere utterances of 'There is water in the basement' do not express the thought that there is water in the basement.

Let us say that a *subjectively equivalent world* for a given person P is one in which P (or a twin of P, as I will call P's counterparts in such worlds) receives the same sensory stimulation that P receives in the actual world, but P (or P's twins') environment is different from what P takes his environment to be in the actual world. Generalizing from standard Twin Earth arguments for (1)–(3), the sceptic accepts that

- (6) For each of us, there are subjectively equivalent worlds in which our (or our twins') sincere utterances express thoughts that are different from the thoughts that we take our sincere utterances to express in the actual world.

The sceptic then adds the following initially plausible premisses

- (7) In all our subjectively equivalent worlds our first-person experiences would be the same.
- (8) Without empirical investigation, our knowledge of our own thoughts is confined to what we can derive solely from our first-person experiences.<sup>2</sup>

From (1)–(8), the sceptic concludes that without empirical investigation we cannot know whether our sincere utterances of 'There is water in the basement' express the thought that there is water in the basement or the thought that there is twin-water in the basement, and, more generally, that without empirical investigation, we cannot know what thoughts our utterances express.

## 2. *Why the sceptical argument is incoherent*

In Ebbs 2001 I argued in effect that if one accepts premisses (7) and (8), then one cannot have justification for accepting premisses (1)–(3) and (6) of the sceptical argument. The problem is that one has no justification for accepting premiss (6) unless one has justification for accepting particular claims about what thoughts one's own utterances would express in various different subjectively equivalent worlds – claims such as (1) and (2), understood in such a way that (3) is true. But if one accepts premisses (7) and (8), then, with or without empirical investigation, one cannot know

<sup>2</sup> Premisses (6)–(8) are numbered (i)–(iii) in Ebbs 2001.

which subjectively equivalent worlds one is actually in,<sup>3</sup> and so one cannot know what thoughts one's sincere utterances of sentences such as (1) and (2) express. One therefore cannot have justification for accepting such sentences.

Brueckner's counter-response in Brueckner 1997 was that the sceptic is justified in believing that *whether he is on Earth or on Twin Earth*, his utterances of sentences (1) and (2) express *true* propositions, so he is justified in believing that he has presented a *sound* argument for his sceptical conclusion that he cannot know what thoughts his utterances express. I pointed out in Ebbs 2001 that this counter-response rests on the premiss that the sceptic is either on Earth or on Twin Earth, and the sceptic cannot justify this premiss if he accepts premisses (7) and (8). I also showed that we can each describe what I call *weird worlds* – subjectively equivalent worlds in which our utterances of sentences (1) and (2) express *false* propositions.<sup>4</sup> But if premisses (7) and (8) are true, no one can know which subjectively equivalent world he is actually in, and so no one can know that he is not in one of his weird worlds (worlds in which his utterances of sentences (1) and (2) express *false* propositions). Hence no one has any justification for claiming that his utterances of sentences (1) and (2) express *true* propositions. Similar reasoning shows that if premisses (7) and (8) are true, then no one is justified in accepting *any* pairs of sentences that support premiss (6), and hence no one is justified in accepting premiss (6). In short, the sceptical argument (1)–(8) is incoherent, or self-undermining, in the sense that *no one can justifiably accept all of its premisses all at once*. I conclude that the sceptic cannot justifiably claim to have put forward a sound argument for his sceptical conclusion.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. Brueckner's attempt to defend the sceptic

Brueckner (2003a: 44–45, n. 5) concedes that the sceptic cannot have justification for believing that his utterances of sentences (1) and (2) express true propositions and grants that there are weird worlds, but tries to show that the sceptical argument is nevertheless coherent. His new defence has three main parts. In the first part, he notes that

<sup>3</sup> Premisses (7)–(8) together imply that I cannot know which subjectively equivalent world I am in even if I *try* to engage in empirical investigation, because I cannot know what thoughts I express when I 'report' the results of my efforts. For a more detailed explanation of this consequence of (7)–(8), see Ebbs 2001: 47.

<sup>4</sup> For a description of one such world, see Ebbs 2001: §4. Nathalie Morasch has recently convinced me that the weird world I present in §4 is under-described. Brueckner accepts my description of it, however, and I will not say more about it here.

<sup>5</sup> This echoes Brueckner's own formulation of my conclusion: 'the sceptic cannot justifiably claim to have put forward a sound argument, since by his own reasoning he does not understand part of his argument' (2003a: 45).

The sceptic wants to establish

~(K) I do not know that I am thinking that there is water in the basement (assuming the absence of empirical investigation).

This is to say that I do not know that my sincere utterances of ‘There is water in the basement’ express the thought I take them to express, viz. the thought that there is water in the basement. (2003a: 46)

In the second part, Brueckner reasons as follows:

There are two possibilities. Either (I) my sincere utterances of ‘There is water in the basement’ express the thought I take them to express, or (II) they do *not*, in virtue of my being in one of my subjectively equivalent worlds in which my sincere utterances of ‘There is water in the basement’ do *not* express the thought I take them to express. According to the sceptic, I do not know which of (I) or (II) is true. (2003a: 46)

Note that Brueckner’s claim that ‘according to the sceptic, I do not know which of (I) and (II) is true’ is a consequence of premisses (7) and (8). The third part of Brueckner’s reasoning is supposed to show that there is no incoherence in the sceptic’s position – that contrary to what I argued in Ebbs 2001, the quoted consequence of premisses (7) and (8) does not imply that the sceptic cannot justifiably claim to have put forward a sound argument for ~K. Brueckner reasons as follows:

Suppose that (I) is true. Then the sorts of worries that Ebbs raised for the soundness of the sceptical argument are unfounded. This is because under our assumption of (I), (1) and (2) express ordinary, true philosophical thoughts about content. So, under our assumption, for all that Ebbs has shown, the sceptic has argued soundly for ~(K). Suppose instead that (II) is true. Then my sincere utterances of ‘There is water in the basement’ do not express the thought I take them to express, in virtue of being in one of my tricky subjectively equivalent worlds (I know not which). In that case, ~(K) is again true: I do not know that I am thinking that there is water in the basement, because I am *not* thinking that thought. Thus, in all of my subjectively equivalent worlds (these are the worlds covered by (I) and (II)), the sceptical conclusion ~(K) is true. (2003a: 46)

From this reasoning Brueckner concludes that ‘the sort of scepticism about self-knowledge under consideration withstands Ebbs’s attempts to impugn its coherence’ (Brueckner 2003a: 46).

#### 4. *Why this defence of the sceptic fails*

In the crucial third part of his reasoning, Brueckner needs to show that whether (I) is true or (II) is true, the sceptic can justifiably claim to have

put forward a sound argument for  $\sim K$ . Let us look carefully at what he says about each case.

Brueckner first argues that if (I) is true, then ‘for all Ebbs has shown, the sceptic has argued soundly for  $\sim K$ .’ Note that this is not what Brueckner needs to show to defend the coherence of the sceptic’s argument, since an argument may be sound even if we have no justification for accepting its premisses. We must therefore check to see whether Brueckner’s reasoning shows that the sceptic has justification for accepting the premisses of his argument. Brueckner reasons that if (I) is true, then ‘(1) and (2) express ordinary, true philosophical thoughts about content.’ But this does not show that the sceptic can justifiably claim to have put forward a sound argument for  $\sim K$ . Even if (I) is true, the sceptic will not assume that he knows that (I) is true, for that would undermine his conclusion, and imply that his argument is unsound (even if (1) and (2) are true). Therefore, even if (I) is true, the sceptic cannot rule out the possibility that (II) is true. In particular, the sceptic cannot rule out the possibility that he is in one of his weird worlds (in which his utterances of (1) and (2) are false) and so, for the reasons explained above, the sceptic cannot justifiably claim to have put forward a sound argument for  $\sim K$ .

Brueckner next argues that if (II) is true, then  $\sim K$  is true, because my belief that my sincere utterances of ‘there is water in the basement’ express the thought that there is water in the basement is false. But this tells us nothing about whether the sceptic can justifiably claim to have put forward a sound argument for  $\sim K$  if (II) is true. Here again, however, the reason I sketched above applies: the sceptic cannot rule out the possibility that he is in one of his weird worlds, in which his utterances of (1) and (2) are false, and so the sceptic cannot justifiably claim to have put forward a sound argument for  $\sim K$ .

I conclude that either way – whether (I) is true or (II) is true – the sceptic cannot justifiably claim to have put forward a sound argument for  $\sim K$ . Hence Brueckner’s reasoning fails to show that the sceptical argument is coherent.

##### 5. *Can the sceptical argument be viewed as a reductio ad absurdum?*

One might grant that Brueckner’s reasoning fails to address my criticism of the sceptic’s reasoning, but still wonder whether my criticism ‘ignores a legitimate dialectical intention on the part of the sceptic’ (2003a: 45). Perhaps the sceptical argument could be viewed as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the assumption that one knows what thoughts one’s own utterances express. The *reductio* strategy would be to assume that one knows what thoughts one’s own utterances express, and to use the sceptical argument to show that one does *not* know what thoughts one’s own utterances express (2003a: 45). Viewed in this way, the incoherence of the reasoning

could perhaps serve a dialectical purpose by reducing the assumption that one knows what thoughts one's own utterances express to absurdity.

The problem with this suggestion is that the incoherence of the sceptical argument does not by itself tell us which of its premisses or assumptions is false. Some philosophers might take the incoherence of the argument to be a *reductio ad absurdum* of premiss (6). I cannot reject premiss (6), however, because I accept premisses (1) and (2), and many similar pairs of sentences that support (6). Some philosophers would reject the closure principle, (4), and, with it, (5). But I see no good reason to reject either one. In my view, the weakest premiss of the sceptical argument is (8), which presupposes a controversial *observational model* of self-knowledge.<sup>6</sup> If we want to view the sceptical argument as a *reductio ad absurdum*, we should view it not as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the assumption that we know what thoughts our sincere utterances express, as Brueckner suggests, but as a *reductio ad absurdum* of premiss (8).<sup>7</sup>

I conclude that the sceptical argument fails for two related reasons. First, it is incoherent, or self-undermining – no one can justifiably accept all of its premisses all at once. Second, its incoherence cannot plausibly be viewed as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the assumption that we know what thoughts our sincere utterances express.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> A number of philosophers reject the observational model of self-knowledge. See, for instance, Burge 1988, Moran 2001, Putnam 1988, and Shoemaker 1988. Brueckner (2003b: 186) himself acknowledges that the observational model is controversial.

<sup>7</sup> In Ebbs 1996, 2001, and 2003, I endorse and develop Putnam's sketchy remarks (in Putnam 1988) about self-knowledge. As I see it, ordinary attributions of self-knowledge suggest that to know what thoughts one's utterances express is just to be able to use one's words in discourse – to make and evaluate assertions, to ask questions, to describe possibilities, and so on. In short, self-knowledge is not observational, but *performative*. For a more complete (but still preliminary) sketch of a performative view of self-knowledge, see Ebbs 1996, 2001, and 2003.

<sup>8</sup> My thanks to Anthony Brueckner, whose response to a letter I sent him in November 2004 prompted me to write this paper.

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