Lecture 24: Bootstrapping Worries for Externalism

I. Distracting Idiosyncrasies in Fumerton’s Presentation

Fumerton’s understanding of the *metaethics* vs. *normative ethics* distinction:

- *metaethics* = an analysis of ethical concepts such as RIGHT, GOOD, etc.
- *normative ethics* = a determination of which actions are right, which things are good, etc.

Fumerton draws a parallel distinction in epistemology:

- *metaepistemology* = an analysis of epistemic concepts such as KNOWLEDGE, JUSTIFICATION, etc.
- *normative epistemology* = a determination of what we know, what we justifiably believe, etc.

Problem: Fumerton’s way of drawing both distinctions is controversial.

For our purposes, all that matters: Fumerton includes the task of answering the skeptic within the category he calls ‘normative epistemology’.

Fumerton also has an idiosyncratic way of formulating skeptical arguments. He thinks they have roughly the following form: (1) we don’t have direct access to some subject matter [the external world, other minds, the past, etc.]; (2) if we don’t have direct access to that subject matter, we can’t have justified beliefs about it; (3) so, we don’t have justified beliefs about that subject matter.

For our purposes, the specific form of the skeptic’s argument won’t matter.

II. Externalism and the First-Level Skeptic

In Fumerton’s terminology, a *first-level skeptic* denies that we have justified beliefs about some domain.

Fumerton insists that the externalist has an easy answer to the *first-level skeptic about the external world*:

> If we happen to be connected to the external world in the right way (for example: if our beliefs about the external world happen to be the outcome of reliable processes), then we *do* have justified beliefs about the external world.

Thus if externalism is correct, it is not the task of the philosopher, *qua* philosopher, to settle this issue of whether the right external connections obtain between us and the world: “The complex causal conditions that determine the presence or absence of justification for a belief are the subject matter of empirical investigations that would take the philosopher out of the easy chair and into the laboratory” (pp. 400-401)

*Fumerton’s first claim*: If externalism is correct, then skeptical inquiry is not part of philosophy.

Fumerton realizes that this is not yet an argument against externalism, since he thinks that it’s fine to say that if consequentialism is the correct analysis of RIGHT ACTION, then normative ethics is not part of philosophy.

III. Externalism and the Second-Level Skeptic

A *second-level skeptic* denies that we have justified beliefs about the reliability of a faculty or method such as perception, memory, inductive reasoning, etc.

It is tempting to think that externalists can answer the first-level skeptic only at the cost of being unable to answer the second-level skeptic. Fumerton points out that this is not so. The externalist’s answer to the *second-level skeptic about perception* is exactly parallel to her answer to the *first-level skeptic about the external world*:

> If we happen to be connected to the external world in the right way (for example: if our beliefs about the reliability of perception happen to be the outcome of reliable processes), then we *do* have justified beliefs about the reliability of perception.
In fact, the externalist need not even go into the lab in order to determine that a given faculty is reliable.

- For example, a reliabilist could argue for the reliability of perception as follows:
  1. I now seem to see a blackboard before me. [by introspection]
  2. There is a blackboard before me. [by perception]
  3. So, my perceptual faculties were accurate this one time. [follows from 1 and 2 by deduction]
  4. I now seem to see a chair before me. [by introspection]
  5. There is a chair before me. [by perception]
  6. So, my perceptual faculties were accurate a second time. [follows from 4 and 5 by deduction]
  ...
  C. Therefore, my perceptual faculties are reliable. [follows from 3, 6, 9, ... by induction]

If introspection and perception happen to be \textit{reliable belief-independent processes}, and if deduction and induction happen to be \textit{conditionally reliable belief-dependent processes}, then the reliabilist must admit that by reasoning in this way I can form a justified belief \textit{that my perceptual faculties are reliable}.

- Similarly, a reliabilist could argue for the reliability of memory as follows:
  1. At \( t_1 \), I seem to remember that at \( t_2 \) it was the case that \( p \). [by introspection at \( t_1 \)]
  2. At \( t_2 \), it was the case that \( p \). [by perception at \( t_2 \) plus memory]
  3. So, my memory was accurate at \( t_1 \). [follows from 1 and 2 by deduction]
  4. At \( t_3 \), I seem to remember that at \( t_4 \) it was the case that \( q \). [by introspection at \( t_3 \)]
  5. At \( t_4 \), it was the case that \( q \). [by perception at \( t_4 \) plus memory]
  6. So, my memory was accurate at \( t_3 \). [follows from 4 and 5 by deduction]
  ...
  C. Therefore, my memory is reliable. [follows from 3, 6, 9, ... by induction]

If introspection and perception happen to be \textit{reliable belief-independent processes}, and if deduction, induction, and memory happen to be \textit{conditionally reliable belief-dependent processes}, then the reliabilist must admit that by reasoning in this way I can form a justified belief \textit{that my memory is reliable}.

\textit{Fumerton’s second claim}: If externalism is correct, then you can use perception to justify the reliability of perception, you can use memory to justify the reliability of memory, etc.

\textbf{IV. “The Fundamental Problem with Externalism”}

But now, Fumerton insists, we have an objection to externalism, since clearly we \textit{cannot} use perception to justify the reliability of perception, \textit{cannot} use memory to justify the reliability of memory, and so on:

“Such attempts to respond to the skeptic’s concerns involves blatant, indeed pathetic, circularity. . . . [T]he very ease with which externalists can deal with the skeptical challenge at the next level betrays the ultimate implausibility of externalism as an attempt to explicate concepts that are of \textit{philosophical interest}” (p. 403).

In pressing this objection, Fumerton seems to be appealing to the following principle:

\textit{Fumerton’s principle}: For any faculty, process, or method of reasoning \( X \), you cannot use \( X \) to justify (in a philosophically interesting sense) the reliability of \( X \).