

Ordinary v. Philosophical Skepticism

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. . . It is crucial that we distinguish between philosophical skepticism and ordinary incredulity because doing so will help to explain why philosophical skepticism is so intriguing. Consider an ordinary case in which we think someone fails to have knowledge. Suppose Anne claims that she knows that the bird she is looking at is a robin and that I believe that if Anne were to look carefully, she would see that its coloration is not quite that of a robin. Its breast is too orange. Further, I believe that it flies somewhat differently than robins do. This bird seems to flutter more than a typical robin.

Thus, there are two grounds for doubting that Anne knows that it is a robin:

- a. The color of this bird isn't typical of robins.
- b. The flight pattern of this bird is not typical of robins.

This is a case of ordinary doubt because there are, in principle, two general ways that are available for removing the grounds for doubt:

1. The alleged grounds for doubt could be shown to be false; or
2. It could be shown that the grounds for doubt, though true, can be neutralized.^[1]

Taking alternative (1), Anne could show that there are many robins with the coloration of the bird in question by citing the *Audubon Field Guide for Birds* in which many of the pictured robins have very orange breasts. In other words, Anne could show that (a) is false.

But in order to remove grounds for doubt, it is not necessary that Anne show that the alleged grounds are false. Alternative (2) is available. Consider ground (b). It could be granted that the bird in question flies in a way that is not at all typical of robins. But suppose that on closer inspection we see that some of its tail feathers have been damaged in a way that could cause the unusual flight pattern. Because the bird has difficulty gliding and flying in a straight line, it flaps its wings much more rapidly than is typical of robins. Thus, although we can grant that (b) is true, we would have explained away, or neutralized, the grounds for doubt.

The point here is that in this case, and in all *ordinary* cases of incredulity, the grounds for the doubt can, in principle, be removed. As Wittgenstein would say, doubt occurs within the context of things undoubted. If something is doubted, something else must be held fast because doubt presupposes that there are means of removing the doubt.^[2] We doubt that the bird is a robin because, at least in part, we think we know how robins typically fly and what their typical coloration is. That is, we think our general picture of the world is right—or right enough—so that it does provide us with both the grounds for doubt and the means for potentially removing the doubt. Thus, ordinary incredulity about some feature of the world occurs against a background of sequestered beliefs about the world. We are not doubting that we have any knowledge of the world. Far from it, we are presupposing that we do know some things about the world. To quote Wittgenstein, “A doubt without an end is not even a doubt” (Wittgenstein 1969, ¶ 625).

In contrast, philosophical skepticism attempts to render doubtful *every* member of a class of propositions that we think falls within our ken. One member of the class is not pitted against

another. The grounds for either withholding assent to the claim that we can have such knowledge or denying that we can have such knowledge are such that there is no possible way to either answer them or neutralize them by appealing to another member of the class because the same doubt applies to each and every member of the class. Thus, philosophic doubt or philosophical skepticism, as opposed to ordinary incredulity, does not, in principle, come to an end. Or so the philosophic skeptic will claim!

To clarify the distinction between ordinary incredulity and philosophical doubt, let us consider two movies: “The Truman Show” and “The Matrix.” In the former, a character is placed, without his knowledge, in a contrived environment so that his “life” can be broadcast on television. But he begins to wonder whether the world surrounding him is, in fact, what it appears to be. Some events seem to happen too regularly and many other things are just not quite as they should be. Eventually, Truman obtains convincing evidence that all his world is a stage and all the men and women are merely players. The crucial point is that even had he not developed any doubts, there is, in principle, a way to resolve them had they arisen. Such doubts, though quite general, are examples of ordinary incredulity.

Contrast this with the deception depicted in *The Matrix*. When everything is running as programmed by the machines, there is no possible way for the “people” in the matrix to determine that the world as experienced is only a “dream world” and not the real world (the world of causes and effects). The only “reality” that it is possible to investigate is a computer generated one. (See Irwin 2002, 2005 for collections of articles on *The Matrix*.)

The Truman Show is a depiction of a case of ordinary incredulity because there is some evidence available for determining what's really the case; whereas *The Matrix* depicts a situation similar to that imagined by the philosophic skeptic in which it is not possible to obtain evidence for determining that things are not as they seem (at least when the virtual reality is perfectly created). Put another way, the philosophic skeptic challenges our ordinary assumption that there is evidence available that can help us to discriminate between the real world and some counterfeit world that appears in all ways to be identical to the real world. Ordinary incredulity arises within the context of other propositions of a similar sort taken to be known, and it can be removed by discovering the truth of some further proposition of the relevant type. On the other hand, philosophical skepticism about a proposition of a certain type derives from considerations that are such that they cannot be removed by appealing to additional propositions of that type—or so the skeptic claims.

These movies illustrate one other fundamental feature of the philosophical arguments for skepticism, namely, that the debate between the skeptics and their opponents takes place within the evidentialist account of knowledge which holds that knowledge is at least true, sufficiently justified belief. The debate is over whether the grounds are such that they can make a belief sufficiently justified so that a responsible epistemic agent is entitled to assent to the proposition.^[3] The basic issue at stake is whether the justification condition can be fulfilled.

Citations:

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Bibliography: “Skepticism.” 2015. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Metaphysics Research lab, Stanford University. Accessed 15 September 2013. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/skepticism/>.