THE KNOWER, INSIDE AND OUT

ABSTRACT. Adherents of the epistemological position called internalism typically believe that the view they oppose, called externalism, is such a new and radical departure from the established way of seeing knowledge that its implications are uninteresting. Perhaps it is relatively novel, but the approach to knowledge with the greatest antiquity is the one that equates it with certainty, and while this conception is amenable to the demands of the internalist, it is also a non-starter in the opinion of almost all contemporary epistemologists since obviously it directly implies that we know nothing about the world. Perhaps skepticism is correct, but there are conceptions of knowledge at least as plausible as the certainty equation that do not obviously land us there. It is its promise along these lines that makes the so-called 'traditional' conception of knowledge initially interesting. But contrary to popular belief, the traditional conception cannot be claimed by internalists if it is to have any chance at all in avoiding skepticism; to avoid skepticism, I shall argue, it has to have an externalist element.

Moreover, each of the departures from the traditional view that appears in the Gettier literature is externalist as well, or at least all of the ones of which I am aware. The only genuine forms of internalism are those held by philosophers who draw a fairly sharp line between knowledge and justified belief, ignore the former, then offer an internalist account of the latter. This approach is very common and very plausible. But it is not as useful as is often thought; in particular, I shall suggest, it must succumb to a form of skepticism.

1. THE PROJECT

The oldest and most venerable project to be pursued by epistemologists (perhaps even the most venerable project of any philosopher) was to decide whether they possessed knowledge of the world in the face of skeptical doubts such as the possible existence of Cartesian demons, and if it turned out to be possible, they wanted to explain what sort of knowledge is possible and how it is possible. Two things are requisite to an answer: a statement of the conditions under which knowledge would exist were those conditions met, and either a convincing argument that those conditions are not (or cannot be) met, or else a good argument that they are in fact met, skeptical doubts notwithstanding, either because skeptical possibilities are incoherent and hence not possibilities after all, or else because the knowledge conditions can be met in spite of the existence of skeptical possibilities.

Even today there are philosophers who argue that knowledge is impossible and others who argue that skeptical doubts are incoherent. Among those antiskeptics who think skeptical scenarios are indeed coherent, there is great disagreement, not just in the antiskeptical arguments they endorse, but also, more fundamentally, over just what knowledge is. Still, none of these people construes it as the capacity to prove beyond any possible doubt what we believe to be true, for this equation of knowledge with certainty obviously plays immediately into the hand of the skeptic.

I suggest that most of the work being done by epistemologists in recent years is designed to contribute to a plausible version of antiskepticism. The idea is to find a viable account of knowledge that is less demanding than the equation of knowledge with certainty, so that the possibility of knowledge can be defended in the face of skeptical worries. I want to offer an examination of the options of hopeful antiskeptics. My sketch will eventually lead to a consideration of the relative merits of the internalist and externalist approaches to knowledge.

2. THE 'TRADITIONALIST' APPROACH TO KNOWLEDGE

Antiskeptics might begin their search for a decent picture of knowledge by equating it with something Bertrand Russell would have called “probable opinion” but which today is called ‘the traditional conception’. As traditionalists, they could search for some notion of justification or warrant given which we are justified in believing most of the things which pre-theoretically we grant that status, then equate knowledge with justified true belief. Proponents of this approach would claim that the mere possibility that we are being deceived by demons, or by scientists who have put our brains into vats, is consistent with knowledge of the world, and explain this by pointing out that a justified belief can still be false, as it would be if certain skeptical possibilities did in fact hold. To justify a claim we need not be incapable of being wrong in what we claim, so even if we cannot rule out the possibility that we are deceived brains in vats we can still be justified in believing such things about the world as that our brains are in our skulls and that there is a table before us.

The abandonment of the equation of knowledge with certainty might strike some as cheating, as begging the question against the skeptic,