3   The limits of cognition

Introduction

So far, we have met two limits of thought: the limit of expression and the limit of iteration (the mathematical infinite). In this chapter we will meet a third: the limit of cognition. As we shall see, this, too, takes us to the verge of contradictions of the characteristic kind.

Cognition concerns relationships that arise between agents and the world that they cognise. Specifically, it concerns the relationships between thought, or language, and the states these (successfully, one hopes) relate to; between representations and the things represented. Typical such relationships, and the ones that will be our primary concern, are knowledge, truth, and rational belief.

We have already met various problematic claims to the effect that certain things transcend our cognition: states in flux (1.3), prime matter (1.6) and God (1.8). But, as might be expected, the situation is thrown into sharpest relief by any doctrine to the effect that there are very definite limits to cognition. Perhaps no doctrine of this kind is more extreme than one according to which there is no objective knowledge of the world at all. A number of views of this kind arose in pre-Kantian philosophy. In this chapter we will look at a couple of them. One way in which the doctrine can arise is in virtue of the claim that there is no objective truth at all (and hence no objective knowledge). This is relativism, and is one of the topics we will look at, mainly through the views of Protagoras. A second way that it can arise is in virtue of the claim that, though there may be objective truths, no evidence can establish what these are. This is skepticism, and is the other topic we will look at, mainly through the writings of Sextus Empiricus.

The contradictions at the limit of cognition that we will look at are all generated in a uniform way. We start with some thesis of the following form, which, for want of a better name, I will call the *Cognition Schema*:

$$\forall x(x \in \Sigma \rightarrow Cx)$$

where the quantifiers range over statements, and C is some cognitive predicate ('is (un)known, (un)true', etc.). We then instantiate the quantifiers in the Schema with (a name for) the Schema, or its negation, itself. To what effect, we will see, in due course. With these preliminary remarks out of the way, let us turn to the first of the topics: skepticism.

3.1   Varieties of skepticism

Skepticism flourished in certain periods in Ancient Greece; and most arguments for skepticism derive from arguments used by the Greek skeptics. Hence it is appropriate to approach the topic through them. There were, in fact, two skeptical traditions in Ancient Greece.[1] The earlier one derives from Pyrrho, and is therefore usually called Pyrrhonism. The other developed in the Academy, and its most distinguished adherent was Carneades. (We will see the major difference in a moment.) The most notable skeptic of the period was the last: the second century AD philosopher Sextus Empiricus. Sextus was a Pyrrhonian, but he also spoke at length about his predecessors, including Carneades. Moreover, since he is the only Greek skeptic whose works have survived, we are largely dependent on him for an account not only of Pyrrhonism, but also of Academic skepticism. Hence we will approach the topic of skepticism largely through his writings.

There are many quite distinct forms of skepticism.[2] They can all be stated by forms of the Cognition Schema. What distinguishes them is simply how they instantiate Σ and C. Depending on the form, the set Σ may comprise propositions about God, the future, noumena or any number of other things. In the case of Greek skepticism, Σ was the class of statements about how things are, as opposed to how they appear to be. Typical members of Σ are the claims: 'The wine is sweet', 'It is day', and so on; typical non-members of Σ are the corresponding: 'This wine appears to me to be sweet', 'It seems to me that it is day', and so on. Greek skeptics claimed that statements of appearances are epistemically unproblematic (since the evidence for them is right before our eyes, as it were); but statements about how things actually are, are not. As Sextus puts it (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, I, 22):[3]

That we adhere to appearances is plain from what we say about the [epistemological] Criterion . . . The Criterion . . . is, we say, the appearance,

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[1] For an excellent discussion of the two, see Stough (1969).
[2] On the history of the various forms of skepticism, see Popkin (1967).
[3] All quotations from Sextus are taken from Bury (1933).

giving this name to what is virtually the sense-presentation. For since this lies in feeling and involuntary affection, it is not open to question. Consequently, no one, I suppose, disputes that the underlying object has this or that appearance; the point in dispute is whether the object is in reality such as it appears to be.

The question of the condition C is slightly more complex. It is always the negation of some positive epistemological notion, P; but there are a number of these. Positive epistemological notions come in a continuum. At the weakest end is something like *it is rationally more probable than not*; at the strongest end is the attitude *it is rationally certain*. I will use the phrase 'rational acceptability' for an attitude at the weakest end of the spectrum. I am aware that such terminology is contentious (and in particular, that one might want a good deal more than the minimal end of the scale for real rational acceptability); but in the present context the definition is just meant to be stipulative.

Even more contentious is where knowledge appears on the scale. Many people think that it is to be applied only to the maximal extreme, since anything less than rational certitude cannot be knowledge. Fallibilists about knowledge, on the other hand, are prepared to use the term for the top end of the scale, not just its top point. Fallibilists about knowledge have to add an extra condition for knowledge, however. For a necessary condition for knowledge is truth. Rational certitude, presumably, implies this; anything less does not. Thus, fallibilists must say that something is known only if it is both at the high end of the scale, and is true. Fortunately we do not need to discuss these issues further for our purposes.[4]

Now, what epistemological attitude is appropriate in a statement of Greek skepticism? In the skepticism of Carneades, and, more generally, Academic skepticism, the attitude was (rational) certitude. Hence their skepticism was to the effect that one cannot be certain about how things are (as opposed to appear), though one may have rational reasons for thinking one view better than another. Sextus, on the other hand, and more generally the Pyrrhonians, formulated their skepticism in terms of rational acceptability. Hence their skepticism was of a much more extreme kind, to the effect that there is *no rational reason of any kind* to prefer any claim about how things are to any other; or, in the phrase Sextus uses, 'no more (this than that)' where (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, I, 190):

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[4] For an introduction to the enormous literature see, for example, Pollock (1986) or Lehrer (1990).

this indicates our feeling, whereby we come to end in equipoise because of the equipollence of the opposed objects [*sc.* propositions]; and by 'equipollence' we mean equality in respect of what seems probable to us, and by 'opposed' we mean in general conflicting, and by 'equipoise' a refusal of assent to either alternative.

The state of equipoise is usually called *epoche*.

3.2   Sextus' argument for skepticism

Sextus compiled and polished all the arguments used for skepticism in both the streams of Greek skepticism. Many of the arguments are *ad hominem*, against various non-skeptics, and, in particular, the Stoics. However, the corner-stone of his skepticism was a very general argument based on the Tropes of Aenesidemus.

The Tropes are all arguments to the effect that the way things appear is dependent on such things as the sense-organs of the perceiver, other subjective factors, the context of perception, and so on. As a corollary, it follows that the same thing can be perceived in quite different, even contradictory, ways by different perceivers, or the same perceiver at different times. An object, for example, appears large when you are close to it, and small when you are far away. These arguments have largely been absorbed into Western philosophy, and are not now contentious.

What Sextus makes of them is, however, contentious. Sextus argues that because the world (i.e., what is the case) is perceived as different by different observers, one can never infer that the world is so-and-so from the mere fact that it appears so-and-so. What is needed, in addition, is some criterion to distinguish those appearances that are veridical from those that are not (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, I, 114):

For he who prefers one impression to another, or one 'circumstance' to another, does so either uncritically or without proof or critically and with proof; but [if he were to do it uncritically] . . . he would be discredited. [So] . . . if he is to pass judgment on the impressions he must certainly judge them by some criterion.

But now we have a problem. For we have reason to believe that the results of applying the criterion are correct only if we have reason to believe that the criterion itself is correct. And the criterion is not itself a statement of appearances; hence, if it is justified it must have some rationale or proof; and now the question arises as to what justification we have for believing that proof to be correct. Clearly, to appeal to the criterion at this point would be to beg the question (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, I, 117):

in this way both the criterion and the proof are involved in the circular process of reasoning, and thereby both are found to be untrustworthy; for since each of them is dependent on the credibility of the other, the one is lacking in credibility just as much as the other.

The only other possibility is that we must be able to give another proof of the correctness of this proof. But the question now arises as to the justification of this proof. Clearly, we are embarked on a regress; and if the regress is not to be terminated illicitly by appealing to the very criterion we were supposed to be justifying, it must go to infinity. But then it is vicious. For then there is no way that we could ever establish that the criterion, or any proof in the series, is correct (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, I, 122f.):

if he [who is trying to justify the criterion] asserts that the proof is true he will be asked for a proof of its truth, and again, for a proof of this latter proof, since it also must be true, and so on *ad infinitum*. But to produce proofs to infinity is impossible; so that neither by the use of proofs will he be able to prefer one sense-impression to another.

Thus, there is no way of justifying the claim that one set of appearances, as opposed to another, is a better indication of how things are. And hence there is no reasonable belief about how things are, as opposed to appear.

3.3   Analysis of the argument

Sextus' argument is an intriguing one. It has a major flaw, however. It assumes that our beliefs about how things are, are all obtained from our beliefs about how things appear to be, by applying some filter which lets through only the veridical perceptions. This assumption he took over from the Stoics; and its empiricism cannot be sustained. It can do no justice to our beliefs concerning, for example, mathematics or theoretical science.

However, this observation does not go to the heart of the matter, since there clearly are beliefs about the world that we have, and that we have in pretty much the way that Sextus supposes – at least in a 'rational reconstruction' of the process. For example, I believe that there is a flag on the pole of the building opposite that in which I write; and I believe this because I can see it out of the window. But even in this case Sextus' argument fails: I do have good (though by no means infallible) reason to suppose that there is a flag.

The flaw in Sextus' argument is, I take it, the claim that in order to have reasonable grounds for my belief I need some criterion which