

Indiana University Alumni Newsletter

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Philosophical skepticism and the coherence of our epistemic practices

As I type this article, do I know that there is a table before me? Common sense declares that I do, but philosophical reflection can quickly lead to the conclusion that common sense is incorrect: no one can know or reasonably believe anything about the world around us. This is the problem of *philosophical skepticism*. It is a kind of paradox. The arguments that generate it are not silly or easily refuted. But they challenge the most basic aspiration of our intellectual lives.

In my recent work, I've tried to put skepticism to rest by reflecting on our ordinary ways of justifying and evaluating beliefs about the world. This is a neglected approach. Philosophers have traditionally created elaborate a priori theories to safeguard the possibility of knowledge. (Descartes, for instance, attempted to prove God's existence and benevolence in order to underwrite our entitlement to rely on our so-called "clear and distinct perceptions.") Such approaches aspire to stand outside our ordinary lives and provide them with an external, philosophical underpinning: a "first philosophy." By contrast, a mid-20th-century tradition including G.E. Moore, J.L. Austin, the later Wittgenstein, and W.V.O. Quine proposed another route: to overcome philosophical skepticism from *within* our ordinary epistemic practices. This approach has been neglected in recent years. I aim to put it back on the mainstream agenda.

I suggest that we should confront the arguments for skepticism in exactly the way we would confront any other surprising claim, by asking, "Why — if at all — should I believe this?" Starting from where we are, I ask, "Can I reasonably be brought to think that I cannot know or even reasonably believe that there is a table before me now?" I believe that the answer is, "No. You can't get there from here." What's more, I believe that we cannot generate a reasonable demand for independent validation of our practices from within the framework of our ordinary epistemic lives. By exploring



Margaret R. Clark

Professor Adam Leite studies the reality of the department's mail boxes.

the extent to which these claims are correct, we can gain insight into the relationship between traditional epistemology and our ordinary lives, an issue that should trouble philosophers more than it generally does.

It is tempting to think that knowledge requires evidence that "rules out" all possibilities of error. (If you recognize you could be in error, the thought goes, how can you also claim to have knowledge?) This thought gives rise to one standard argument for skepticism: we can never attain infallible evidence, so we can't ever have knowledge. An easy response to this argument is that we do not insist upon completely infallible evidence in ordinary life or in science. It is often suggested that this does not defeat the skeptic's argument because our ordinary ways of talking about knowledge are misleading: they are shaped by the practical demands of everyday life, and so we don't recognize that knowledge requires infallibility until philosophical reflection leads us to ignore our everyday concerns. However, this view of our ordinary lives is wrong, as I've argued in "Is

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From the chair

Transitions

[Editor's note: Tim O'Connor has just begun a term as chair of the IU Department of Philosophy. He succeeds Mark Kaplan.]

The face of philosophy at IU continues to undergo a period of major transition. My colleagues probably stumbled a bit in drafting me to a three-year term as department chair, beginning this past summer. But on the bright side, IU scored a major coup by luring Gary Ebbs away from Illinois. (Gary is a specialist in philosophy of language and logic and in epistemology.) Gary surrendered to the inevitable after we had already hired away his colleagues Marcia Baron, Fred Schmitt, Kate Abramson and then snatched up two stellar phi-



Tim O'Connor

losophers that Illinois had tried to hire as replacements, Mark Kaplan and Joan Weiner. I know this might look bad, even cruel, but we didn't set out

to empty their ranks (honestly). And it certainly had nothing to do with payback for all their comparative success in basketball in recent years, as some have alleged. Still, it's probably best for IU philosophy alumni to keep a low profile these days when visiting Urbana's flat fine campus.

To understand the emerging face of IU philosophy, take a gander at our remodeled department Web site: www.indiana.edu/~phil/. We have coverage in all major areas of the discipline while boasting notable strengths in epistemology, early analytic philosophy, ethics, and the

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Skepticism

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Fallibility an Epistemological Shortcoming?” (2004). We are, consequently, free to insist, in accordance with our ordinary practices, that the fallibility of our evidence does not prevent us from having knowledge. We thus have good reason to reject this skeptical argument.

A second skeptical argument, known as the “problem of the regress,” runs as follows. To be justified, you must be able to provide a good reason for your belief, a good reason for believing that reason, and so on. But then it seems that you can never justify any belief. To refuse to provide reasons at any point would be arbitrary and dogmatic. To repeat yourself is to argue in a circle. And, of course, you can’t offer an infinite series of reasons for your beliefs. In “A Localist Solution to the Regress of Justification” (2005), I develop a new response to this puzzle. I draw on our actual practices to show that no vicious regress results from accepting (1) that in order to be justified, you have to be able to provide a good reason for your belief, and (2) that you must be justified in believing whatever you might offer as your reason. To be justified, I propose, is to possess a certain *ability*: the ability to draw upon your background beliefs to provide good reasons for holding the belief in question, ultimately by providing reasons that you recognize there to be no reason to doubt. This is an ability that we can possess.

Even if all this right, you might still feel dissatisfied. You might also want an independent or external validation of our practices, an argument that shows how and why they enable us to arrive at knowledge. This demand can take several forms. One prominent form is the attempt (initiated by Descartes’ *Meditations*) to explain our knowledge of the world without presupposing any claims about the world. It is arguable that once you take up the standpoint involved in this project, it becomes impossible to see how we could have knowledge of the world. In “Epistemological Externalism and the Project of Traditional Epistemology” (2006), I argue that the problem lies with the project. Given certain plausible assumptions about knowledge and reasons for belief, we can have knowledge and reasonable beliefs about the world even if we cannot explain, from Descartes’ artificial standpoint, how this is possible. So why engage in this project at all?

Taken together, the above arguments provide the basic support for my claim that “you can’t get there from here.” However, an important skeptical argument remains. Consider the possibility that you are just dreaming that there is a piece of paper before you (or, in keeping with our high-

Faculty update: Nino Cocchiarella

In November 2005, Professor Emeritus Nino B. Cocchiarella delivered a paper, “Infinity in Ontology and Mind,” at an international interdisciplinary conference on infinity at the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome, Italy. The conference was supported in part by the John Tempelton Foundation for a multiple-year project on Science, Theology and the Ontological Quest. Cocchiarella had also given an intensive course in the previous year at the Lateran University on formal ontology under the STOQ project, and his paper was an extension of that course.

After the conference on infinity in Rome, Cocchiarella delivered a lecture on potential infinity at the classical liceo in Benevento, the capital of the province of Benevento, Italy. In the previous year, Cocchiarella had been presented with a *Gladiatore D’Oro* (Golden Gladiator) award as a distinguished sanniti for his work in logic, formal ontology, and philosophy. The sanniti are a people who have lived in the south-central part of Italy, called the Sannio, for the past 3,000 years.

Cocchiarella has completed a forthcoming book, *Formal Ontology and Conceptual Realism*, based on his lectures in Rome. Also forthcoming by Cocchiarella, together with Max Freund — who wrote his PhD thesis under Cocchiarella here at IU and who is now a professor at the University of Costa Rica — is a textbook, *Modal Logic: An Introduction to its Syntax and Semantics*, based on Cocchiarella’s lectures on modal logic here at IU and covers his work on second-order modal logic, both possibilist and actualist, as well as standard sentential and first-order modal logic.

tech age, that you are being subjected to deceptive sensory stimulations by a crazed neuroscientist). It seems that you can’t know or reasonably believe that there is a piece of paper before you unless you have reason to believe that these possibilities are not the case. But it also seems that you can’t know that you aren’t being deceived in these ways! Any evidence you might appeal to could itself be the product of a dream or of the neuroscientist’s machinations. So it seems that there is nothing you could appeal to in support of the belief that you aren’t being deceived. It consequently seems that you can’t know or reasonably believe anything about the world around you. But that can’t be right. What has gone wrong?

One common response is to say that you can know there is a piece of paper before you even if you don’t have any reason to believe that you are not dreaming. This response strikes me as incredible. How can I know that there is a piece of paper before me if I don’t even have reason to believe that I am not just dreaming? A more satisfying response would explain how we can know that we aren’t dreaming. After all, our natural response is to say, “Of course I have reason to believe that I am not asleep and dreaming; this is nothing like a dream!”

It turns out that this form of skepticism depends upon empirical premises about dreams that we have good reason to reject. Turning this insight into a satisfying response requires showing that it’s not utterly question-begging to appeal to empirical premises in this context. This is a tricky matter, since the skeptical argument purports to call into question all our knowledge of empirical truths. But if it can be pulled off, then there really won’t be any way “to get

there from here.” We will have inoculated ourselves from the threat of skepticism.

For more details about my current and upcoming projects, as well as copies of the papers referred to in this article, see my Web page — <http://mypage.iu.edu/~7Ealeite/>. Whatever you do for a living, happy philosophizing!

— Adam Leite
Associate Professor of Philosophy

PHILOSOPHY

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John Green Musselman, PhD'00: A long and winding road

For the last four years, I worked in the Center for Teaching Excellence at St. Edward's University in Austin, Texas. St. Edward's is a Catholic liberal-arts college with traditional residential students, a "New College" undergraduate program for working adults, and MA programs in business, computer-information systems, counseling, human services, liberal arts, project management, and teaching. When I first started at St. Edward's in a teaching center, I wasn't sure how a degree in philosophy would be useful. However, it turned out that philosophy was the key that unlocked a lot of doors.

I got to St. Edward's following a long and winding road from Indiana University Bloomington through New England and on to Texas. Elizabeth and I had moved from western Massachusetts to Texas in 1999 so she could start a tenure-track job at a small liberal-arts college north of Austin, Southwestern University, and so I could finish my degree. Before moving, I had a tenure-track job in a great community college in western Massachusetts, but the teaching load wasn't helping me finish. After we moved to Texas so Elizabeth could start a faculty job nearly perfect

for an IUB HPS PhD, I took a year away from the classroom to finish my degree. But after teaching as an adjunct and then as a visitor at Southwestern, I really didn't know what to do next. After all, Elizabeth was very happy at Southwestern and we had already tried living apart when she had a postdoctoral position at the University of Oklahoma and I was in western Massachusetts — and I really wasn't interested in trying that again.

In 2002, Elizabeth suggested I look at the CTE at St. Edward's because they were hiring something called a faculty development associate. I really didn't know what that was, nor what a teaching center did, but St. Edward's looked great online, and I applied. Within a week I was hired as the assistant to the CTE director, and, shortly after that, I started as an adjunct instructor in the Philosophy Department.

For those (like me back then) who don't know much about teaching centers, they provide private and confidential one-on-one pedagogical consultations and any other faculty development instructors need. From my first day at work, I was observing faculty in every discipline as they lectured and ran discussions; serving on committees

to discuss placing course evaluations online and reviewing applications for in-house scholarly grants and teaching awards; and reading faculty applications for NEH summer grants and Fulbrights as well as writing part of our (eventually successful) McNair Scholars Program grant. At first, I was concerned that I hadn't trained for this job in any formal way, and it certainly wasn't clear philosophy would be very helpful, either.

In short order, I was glad to learn that I was wrong. It turned out that while observing a class in accounting, I could discern that the main unstated premise to the course was "to provide accurate information to make useful financial decisions," and suggesting that the instructor organize her class around that stated premise helped focus her lectures. Likewise, serving on committees to place course evaluations online required analyzing arguments against the change from paper to online forms and presenting counter-arguments that could convince collegiate colleagues that the risk could be worth the reward. (In fact, at faculty development conferences for teaching-center peers, I was able to present the case in such a clear and compelling fashion that

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Alumni news

Eric C. Barnes, MA'89, PhD'90, an associate professor at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, writes, "Just finished writing my first book; now I'll try to get it published. Wish me luck!"

Tyler Bond, BA'05, is working on his master's degree at Fordham University in New York City. He is studying elections and campaign management. He worked as administrative assistant in the membership department of the IUAA from September 2005 to July.

Daniel J. Boucher, BA'86, MA'89, was recently tenured and promoted to associate professor in the Asian studies department at Cornell University. In 2005, he reported that he was working on a book manuscript that he planned to submit to the University of Hawaii Press, titled "Bodhisattvas of the Forest and the Formation of the Mahayana: A Study and Translation of the Restrapalaparipriccha-sutra."

Aimee B. Dawson, BA'03, reports that she is pursuing a master's in public policy at the University of Chicago and is setting her career sights on public-sector consulting.

John Fisher Gray, BA'84, is working in Brussels as the head of human resources for Basell Polyolefins Europe and Basell's global Advanced Polyolefins business. His son attends a Flemish school for children with autism and other developmental disabilities. His daughters attend the International School of Brussels. They are all enjoying life in Europe. Gray and his wife were founding members several years ago of the Autism Society of Delaware, and they continue their support from abroad.

Summer Johnson, BA'03, lives in Baltimore and is working on a doctorate in bioethics and health policy at Johns Hopkins University.

Ziauddin Mollabashy, BA'93, joined the Indianapolis office of Barnes & Thornburg as an associate staff attorney in the business, tax, and real estate department. His address is zia_mollabashy@hotmail.com.

Andrew U.D. Straw, BA'92, MS'95, JD'97, is a research assistant in the education faculty of the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand. He researches and writes on critical literacy from a post-structuralist perspective. He has two children, Ava and Manu, with his wife, Paola Voci, MA'97, PhD'02.

Hans-Joerg Tiede, Cert/MS/PhD'99, writes, "I was granted tenure in the Department of Mathematics and Computer Science and promoted to associate professor of computer science at Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington, Ill. I live with my wife, Moreena (Bond), MA'98, and our daughters, Annika and Franciska, in Normal, Ill. My most recent publication, a survey of applications of modal logic in linguistics, is to appear in the *Handbook of Modal Logic*. The chapter was co-authored with my IU PhD adviser, Larry Moss."

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From the chair

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philosophy of mind. And we're not done yet. With one offer out for a senior-level appointment and a similar search now under way, we hope to have two outstanding new scholar-teachers in our program soon. And as time's tooth will soon bring us a few retirements, the rebuilding process will continue throughout my tenure. I've got big shoes to fill in trying to match the exceptional leadership shown by Karen Hanson and Mark Kaplan in guiding us through stellar recent appointments.

You'll notice that we're doing some different things in these pages. This issue inaugurates two new features: a spotlight on the career path of one of our alumni and one faculty member's attempt to acquaint you, dear reader, with the set of philosophical issues and conundrums that are currently occupying his scholarly attention. (For briefer snapshots of the interests of individual faculty members, follow the "faculty" link on the left side of our department home page.) Our final page will highlight select bits of news.

— Tim O'Connor

Alumni spotlight

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some of these peers suggested I had made the most convincing argument for such a program that they ever heard.) Finally, the analytical and narrative skills needed for writing conference papers and teaching Mill and Kant were the same as those needed for reviewing and writing successful grant applications in the CTE — and beyond the gates of the university, as well.

After four years as a CTE staff member, I moved last summer to a faculty position in our Center for Ethics and Leadership. Though my new role won't involve work as a teaching coach, my job in the CTE helped me learn how to conduct the one-on-one consultations that will be central to my new position. While I look forward to being a faculty member in philosophy, I'll also miss the chance to observe instructors all over campus — observations that were a kind of second chance to try college all over again without having to do the homework!

If y'all make it to Austin for the music, food, or to do research at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, let me know you're headed this way. While you're here, I'll be sure to introduce you to the most intelligent and sweet 2-year-old in town, Liam Green Musselman.

— John "Jack" Green Musselman, PhD'00
St. Edward's University, Austin, Texas
<http://faculty.stedwards.edu/jackgm/>

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