

Phil 122 - Pryor's Dogmatism

1. The Skeptic's Argument

Pryor's reconstruction of the skeptic's argument focuses on the "skeptical principle about justification":

SPJ To be justified in believing p on the basis of an experience E , you need to have antecedent justification that conflicting beliefs (that are consistent with E) are false—justification which doesn't rest on or presuppose any E -based justification you may have for believing p .

What motivates the skeptic's argument is "the idea that we're entitled to rely on our perceptual beliefs only if we're antecedently entitled to the assumptions that we're not deceived by an evil demon, or dreaming, and so on" (531). That is, the skeptic thinks that we must rule out the 'bad' cases in order to be justified in believing that we're in a 'good' case. This idea is Pryor's target.

2. Pryor's Dogmatism

Dogmatism (About Perceptual Justification): When it perceptually seems to you as if p is the case, you have a kind of justification for believing p that does not presuppose or rest on your justification for anything else.

Mediate Justification: You are 'mediately justified' in believing p iff you're justified in believing p , and this justification rests in part on the justification you have for believing other supporting propositions.

Ex. Your justification for the belief that your car is out of gas rests on your justification for particular beliefs about cars/gas gauges.

Immediate Justification: You are 'immediately justified' in believing p iff you're justified in believing p , and this justification doesn't rest on any evidence or justification you have for believing other propositions.

Ex. Your justification for a belief about your emotional state.

The kind of justification that Pryor has in mind is *prima facie* justification—justification that provides initial support for a belief, but can later be undermined or defeated.

So dogmatism is the view that perceptual experiences provide immediate, but defeasible, justification for external world beliefs. This is in direct conflict with SPJ. Under dogmatism, you need to actually have evidence that you're in the 'bad' case in order to undermine the *prima facie* justification for your external world beliefs. So if dogmatism is right, then the skeptical argument loses its force.

3. Is Dogmatism right?

Pryor's argument "proceeds via standard philosophical methodology: we start with what it seems intuitively natural to say about perception, and we retain that natural view until we find objections that require us to abandon it. This is just sensible philosophical conservatism" (538).

So Pryor first notes that dogmatism is very natural and highly intuitive:

"When asked, 'What justifies you in believing there are hands?' one is likely to respond, 'I can *simply see* that there are hands.' One might be wrong: one might not really be seeing a hand. But it seems like *the mere fact* that one has a visual experience of that phenomenological sort is enough to make it reasonable for one to believe that there are hands. No *premises* about the character of one's experience—or any other sophisticated assumptions—seem to be needed." (536)

“Our experiences *do* intuitively seem to justify us in believing a great many things about the external world, all by themselves. Some examples: there is a light ahead; ... there is something solid here (a belief you form while pressing against a wall).” (537)

Objections

1. *‘Theory-Laden’ Perception*: a background theory necessarily plays a role in your acquisition of even *prima facie* justification from your senses.

Pryor’s single-line reply: “It’s quite unclear whether we have any good reasons to believe that observation is theory-laden in this sense.” (541)

2. *The Demarcation Problem*: Dogmatism clearly can’t work in a number of cases (ex. a belief about your car’s gas levels), and it’s difficult to come up with some *principled* way of distinguishing the cases for which it is appropriate from those cases for which it isn’t.

Pryor’s reply: Dogmatism applies only to *perceptually basic* beliefs. We can distinguish between the propositions that we come to believe *on the basis* of what’s presented in perceptual experience and that which is presented in perceptual experience itself. Consequently, for a perceptually basic belief to be false, some kind of misperception must be involved.

3. *Smuggling in a Constraint*: There seems to be a hidden claim that it’s somehow *rational* to place more credence on the ‘good’ case than the ‘bad’ case. You might think dogmatism’s slogan is: “Unless you have reason to think you’re in the bad case, you’re better off thinking you’re in the good case.” And this is to express some *default* position for rational thinkers.

Reply: This assumes that there has to be some ‘default’ background belief that mediates our judgments, and that’s precisely what dogmatism wants to deny.

4. *The Second-Level Problem*: Dogmatism will want to allow that an agent can be justified in believing a claim while having *no attitude at all* regarding the relevant background beliefs/accuracy conditions. And this seems to clash with our intuitions about how agents understand their own beliefs. We think it absurd that someone endorses a claim but refuses to take a position on the background conditions. Consider the following dialogue:

- “Why do you believe that *p*?”
- “Because it looks to me to be the case that *p* and I have no reason to regard my visual system as defective”
- “So: you take it that it is reasonable to believe that your visual system is likely to be trustworthy unless there is evidence that it may not be functioning properly?”
- “*I do not need to have a view about that*. I repeat: it looks to me that *p* and I have no reason to doubt that my visual system is working properly. I therefore claim warrant for *p*.”

4. Where does this debate go?

Perhaps there's a sense in which the skeptic and the dogmatist agree: in any given case, there's no way to *guarantee* that no mistake has been made. Their only disagreement lies in what the consequences of this are. The dogmatist, wielding a fallibilist conception of justification, sees that as no problem. And the skeptic, wielding a very particular conception of what is required for justification, sees that as an insurmountable difficulty. So perhaps the dispute really ought to focus on the general requirements for justification.