

FREE WILL AS A SCEPTICAL THREAT TO KNOWING

STEPHEN HETHERINGTON
The University of New South Wales

ABSTRACT

Sceptics standardly argue that a person lacks knowledge due to an inability to know that some dire possibility is not being actualised in her believing that p . I argue that the usual sceptical inventory of such possibilities should include one's possibly having had some freedom in forming one's belief that p . A sceptic should conclude that wherever there might have been some such freedom, there is no knowledge that p . (This is not to say that sceptics would be correct in that conclusion. It is just to say that the usual sceptical way of thinking should welcome the possibility of some such belief-freedom as much as it routinely welcomes the possibilities of dreaming and of evil demons.)

This paper presents an argument for the conclusion that no one has any knowledge — in short, for radical epistemic scepticism. The argument concerns a particular kind of *free will*.

I

Sceptical arguments tend to instantiate (or to be able to instantiate) this form of inference:

A person knows that p , only if she knows that not- q
No one knows that not- q
So, no one knows that p

Specific sceptical arguments specify what they take to be appropriate ranges for " p " and for " q ". A Cartesian sceptical

argument, for instance, could deny us all *external world* knowledge, linking one's knowing that p (for any external world proposition p) to one's knowing that one is not *dreaming* that p . Or, to take another example, we could be denied *all* knowledge, with one's knowing that p (for any proposition p) being linked to one's knowing that one is not being manipulated by an *evil demon* into believing that p . By being used in this way, dreaming and one's being the plaything of an evil demon are treated as *sceptical possibilities*.

It is not that any sceptics think that all of us *are* dreaming or that all of us *are* being toyed with by an evil demon. But either of these states of affairs is possible — at least for all that we know to the contrary (insist Cartesian sceptics). And if one *is* dreaming, then one lacks all external world knowledge, just as, if one *is* being manipulated by an evil demon, then one lacks all knowledge. So, could one know that these possibilities are not actual? One could not (claim Cartesian sceptics), since in each case one's evidence is not sufficient to rule out the associated sceptical possibility. That is because in each case one's *evidence* could be caused by these possibilities. One's evidence for p 's being true could itself be being dreamt, or it could itself have been implanted in one by the evil demon.

Those ways of arguing are familiar to epistemologists. They are usually unwelcome, too, since most epistemologists are not sceptics. I am no sceptic either, but what matters to me in this paper is simply to add to our *understanding* of scepticism. We should appreciate how scepticism can be generated no less easily by the possibility of our having a specific kind of *free will* than by the standard sceptical possibilities of dreaming and of an evil demon. How *worrying* are those three possibilities? Not very, in my view, however, before we attempt to undermine scepticism it is

important to be aware of the *various* ways in which it can arise I will describe — without evaluating — one of those ways, one of which epistemologists seem not to have been aware

II

The most general form of the sort of free will on which I will focus is Peter van Inwagen's,¹ and it is as follows. A person has *free will* at a time t , as regards being or doing X at a subsequent time t^+ , if and only if her being or doing X at t^+ is not *determined* at t . And, at its most general, determinism is the thesis that, at each moment, the state of the world at that time and the laws of nature jointly entail, for each subsequent moment, one and only one particular state of the world. In this paper, therefore, whenever I talk of free will I am talking of a kind of indeterministic *freedom* at t to be or do X at t^+ . In particular, I am talking of the following kind of freedom at t to be or do X at t^+

The state of the world at t and the laws of nature do not jointly entail one's not being or doing X at t^+

I do not know whether there is any such freedom in the world. Nor, of course, is it the only possible sense of free will, let alone of freedom, which philosophers discuss. Nevertheless, the sceptical argument I will outline concerns *only* this sense of freedom, and it requires only the *possibility* of some such freedom.

Indeed, the sceptical argument I will outline requires only the possibility of a specific *narrower* form of that sense of freedom. Even if free will is not available in all of the possible forms it might be thought to take, some narrower kinds of it might still be available. For instance, my scepti-

cal argument will focus on the possibility of people's *beliefs* coming about freely, in van Inwagen's sense of freedom. This paper's sceptic begins by observing that if there is a possibility that some or all aspects of the world — including some or all aspects of us — are produced indeterministically, then the ways in which we form beliefs might be among those aspects.

So, for brevity, I will talk of *belief-freedom*, with its pertinent contrary being *belief-determinism*. Belief-freedom, in the sense in which I will understand it, is thus *belief-indeterminism*. I am using the terms "determinism" and "free will" (or "freedom") in van Inwagen's way, and, as such, they are mutually exclusive. Accordingly, the same is true of my uses of the terms "belief-determinism" and "belief-freedom" for the sake of developing this paper's sceptical argument, I will assume that no belief can be formed both deterministically and freely. It is the possibility of this incompatibilist kind of belief-freedom upon which sceptics may call, as we will see.

As the previous section indicated, though, I will not be endorsing this paper's sceptical argument. My lone aim in this paper is to show why *sceptics* might accept that argument. (Consequently, for instance, any objections by non-sceptics to the argument's *plausibility* would be beside the immediate point.) Nor am I meaning to enter the philosophical debate over whether compatibilism is true in general, let alone to assess whether it is true of belief-formation in particular. Even if the usual debate about compatibilism should lead us to conclude that there is a coherent sense of "freedom", say, according to which a belief could occur both deterministically and freely, that would not prevent belief-freedom — *in this paper's specific sense of it* — from being a sceptical possibility, along the lines I will describe. It would entail at most that some *other* sort of freedom —

some kind which *is* compatible with a correlative sense of determinism — does not spawn this sceptical worry. And even if that other sort of freedom is, for most of us, a more *recognisable* or *intuitive* sort of freedom, all that would follow is that this paper's sceptical argument is more technical, less intuitive, than I believe it to be. But that remains irrelevant to whether the sceptical argument is logically *sound* — hence, to whether the argument succeeds in establishing its sceptical conclusion. All that would follow is that the sceptical argument in this paper derives its conclusion, not as a result of thinking about what we might *prefer* to call belief-freedom, but instead by reflecting on a related possibility, a more technical and less intuitive one — the possibility of belief-freedom*, as we might (but I will not) call it. In what follows, therefore, I will ignore those potential qualifications, because none of them affects the logical soundness of the sceptical argument I am about to present. That argument is not calling on *all* possible senses of free will or of freedom or of indeterminism, it is calling only on van Inwagen's sense in particular, as applied to belief-formation in particular.

III

Here is this paper's sceptical argument (for any value of "p")

- F
- 1 A person knows that *p*, only if she knows that she did not freely come to believe that *p*
 - 2 No one knows that she did not freely come to believe that *p*
 - 3 So, no one knows that *p*

Clearly, F3 is entailed by the conjunction of F1 and F2

And my hypothesised sceptic accepts both F1 and F2. But how would a sceptic *argue* for their truth? I will consider each premise in turn (in, respectively, sections IV and V)

IV

Premise F1 How can *freely* coming to believe that p be a threat to one's knowing that p ? Well (sceptics might reply), where there is freedom to choose, there is freedom to choose *incorrectly*. Although that would not be the intent, it could be the result. If an epistemic subject is free to believe that p , to disbelieve that p , or to neither believe nor disbelieve that p , then she is free either to believe something false (be it p or be it not- p) or to fail to believe something that is true (be it p or be it not- p). And, according to a sceptic who would endorse F1, the existence of this belief-freedom is a threat to *knowing* that p . In order to appreciate why a sceptic might make this claim, there are two cases we need to consider, an epistemically internalist case and an epistemically externalist one.²

(i) *Internalist Belief-Freedom* Suppose that the epistemic subject has belief-freedom in relation to her *good evidence* for p . That is, her having that evidence does not entail — it does not determine — her believing that p . She has some freedom, even relative to her good evidence, as to whether in fact she will form the belief that p . Now imagine that she does proceed to form the belief that p on the basis of that evidence. Even if the belief is true (and all else is equal), it nevertheless fails to be knowledge that p . The reason is that, insofar as one's having good evidence is a crucial element in the true belief's being knowledge, one's having that evidence needs to be a crucial determinant of one's having that belief.³ More precisely. To the extent that one's knowing that p needs to *include* good evidence, one's belief

that p also needs to be *determined* by that evidence. To the extent that the presence of the evidence helps to *constitute* the knowing, it needs to *bring about* the knowing. The knowing needs to be determined to that extent by one's having the good evidence, by one's understanding it as being the good evidence it is, and by one's reacting accordingly — that is, by one's forming the belief deterministically, being led in that way by one's good evidence. Otherwise, the conjunction of the good evidence and the belief, even if the latter follows the former and even if the latter is true, is not knowledge. There would not be the right metaphysical 'glue' binding those elements to each other. The belief would not have been formed *because* of the evidence, in a sufficiently strong sense of "because." It would not have been formed as part of a sufficiently strict *rational* process to be knowledge.

(ii) *Externalist Belief-Freedom* Suppose that the epistemic subject has belief-freedom in relation to what an externalist would regard as being the pertinent *external circumstances* for her coming to know that p . Those circumstances might include, for instance, the reliability of the particular process by which she would form her belief that p , or the causal path by which she would form that belief. By hypothesis, though, those circumstances do not determine her forming that belief: she has freedom, even in those circumstances, as to whether in fact she will form the belief that p . Now imagine that she does proceed to form the belief that p in those appropriate circumstances. Even if the belief is true (and all else is equal), it nevertheless fails to be knowledge that p . The reason is that, insofar as one's being in appropriate circumstances is a crucial element in the true belief's being knowledge (and even when the true belief is accompanied by good internalist evidence),⁴ one's being in those circumstances needs to be a crucial determinant of one's ha-

ving that belief. More precisely: To the extent that one's knowing that p needs to *include* one's being in appropriate circumstances, one's belief that p also needs to be *determined* by one's being in those circumstances. To the extent that the presence of those circumstances helps to *constitute* the knowing, it needs to *bring about* the knowing. Otherwise, the conjunction of the appropriate circumstances and the belief, even if the latter is true and accompanied by good evidence for its truth, is not sufficient for the belief's being knowledge.⁵ The belief would not have been formed *because* of one's being in the appropriate circumstances, in a sufficiently strong sense of "because." It would not have been formed as part of a sufficiently strict *natural* process to be knowledge.

(iii) If an epistemic subject, while having belief-freedom as regards p , knows that p , then that belief-freedom has been exercised in relation to some internalist, and/or some externalist, element(s) of her knowing that p . But, from (i) and (ii), the sceptic will say that in relation either to internalist or to externalist elements of the putative knowledge that p , the exercise of that belief-freedom will *not* give the epistemic subject knowledge that p . Consequently, the sceptic will sum up the combined effect of (i) and (ii) in this way:

$f \sim k$ If at time t one freely comes to believe that p , then at t one's belief that p is not knowledge.

Does $f \sim k$ entail F1, though? Even if (as the sceptic claims, in $f \sim k$) a belief's being formed freely implies its not being knowledge, must one therefore (as F1 insists) *know* that one's belief has not been formed freely, if one's belief is to be knowledge? Some sceptics might hesitate to infer F1 from $f \sim k$. After all, not many sceptics insist that, for *every*

q whose truth would entail one's failure to know that p , a necessary condition of one's knowing that p is one's knowing that not- q . Perhaps one's lacking belief-freedom as regards p is necessary to one's knowing that p . However, why should a sceptic believe that one's *knowing* that one lacks belief-freedom as regards p is necessary to one's knowing that p ?

One answer is that there is at least as much onus on an epistemic subject to know whether her belief that p has been formed *freely* as there is on her to know whether she is *dreaming* that p or whether she is being manipulated by an *evil demon* into believing that p . Apart from anything else, whether one's belief is formed freely is part of what is at stake in whether one is dreaming and whether one is being toyed with by an evil demon. The question of whether one had that freedom in forming one's belief is at least as metaphysically important to an epistemic subject's sense of self — of gaining her *own* knowledge — at the moment of putatively knowing as are the questions of whether she is dreaming and of whether there is an evil demon in control of her. Accordingly, there is at least this *ad hominem* result available

Sceptics standardly believe that such possibilities as that of dreaming and that of an evil demon need to be known not to be actualised, if external world knowledge, say, is to be present. So, they should be no less insistent on an epistemic subject's needing to know that the possibility of her having belief-freedom as regards p is not being actualised, if she is to know that p . One's having belief-freedom is *at a comparable metaphysical level*, at that moment, to one's dreaming or one's being manipulated by an evil demon.

A *sceptic*, at any rate, should therefore conclude that $f \sim k$ does indeed imply F1

V

Premise F2 How could a sceptic try to justify F2? Sceptics might well call on the following sort of reasoning as they seek to show that one can never know that one lacked freedom in forming the belief that p — that is, that one can never know that one's belief was formed deterministically

To know that one's belief was formed deterministically would be to know a *lot* about the belief's antecedents. It would be to know that the belief has been formed deterministically by way (in part) of some good evidence for the belief, and/or of some appropriate external circumstances. But it would *also* be to know that the good evidence for the belief has itself been gained deterministically, and/or that the external circumstances that led to the belief have themselves been brought about deterministically.⁶ Not only that, it would also be to know that the evidence for *that* evidence has itself been gained deterministically, and/or that the externalist circumstances that led to *those* externalist circumstances, have themselves been formed deterministically. (Otherwise, for all that one knows to the contrary, along the way there will have been indeterminism — freedom — in the existence of some antecedent(s) of one's forming the original belief, and hence, *ipso facto*, there will have been freedom — indeterminism — in one's having formed the original belief.) What is more, this known pattern — one's knowledge of this series of deterministic links — needs to continue, all the way back to the world's first moment. So, to know that one's belief has not been formed freely — indeterministically — is to know that there has been this *inordinately lengthy* deterministic antecedent

for the belief Yet (the sceptic will claim) the complexity and scope of this knowledge renders it unavailable to us No one ever has such complicated and extensive knowledge about the history — prehistory, in effect — of a particular belief of hers One would need to know that at *each* time *t* in the history of this world, the state of the world at *t* and the laws of nature jointly entailed one's believing now that *p*, and surely no one ever has that knowledge Consequently (concludes the sceptic), F2 is true No one ever knows that a particular belief of hers has not been formed freely, no one ever knows that her belief has been formed deterministically

But doesn't F2 need more support than that? All that has been shown so far by the hypothesised sceptic is that any knowledge which would falsify F2 — specifically, the knowledge that one did not freely come to believe that *p* — would be *very hard* to obtain We have not yet been shown how a sceptic would argue that such knowledge is *impossible* to obtain — impossible in principle, that is And presumably the sceptic will regard F2 as being a *conceptual* truth, a denial that even someone who had been alive since the world's first moment could know that her belief had been formed deterministically So, how might a sceptic try to support F2 when it is interpreted *that* strongly?

It would be natural for her to point to what she will say is the ever-present *epistemic possibility* that one's belief has been formed freely, indeterministically Even when a belief feels to one as though it has been forced deterministically upon one, for instance, it might in fact not have been formed like that Even relative to whatever evidence one might possess for the belief's having a deterministic genesis, there remains the possibility that freedom — indeterminism — has been involved at some stage of that genesis That possibility persists perennially (the sceptic will say), in much

the same way as does the possibility of one's belief having been brought about by a Cartesian evil demon's intervention, for example. Could all of one's beliefs have been produced by an evil demon who never directly *reveals* his — the demon's — role in those beliefs having been produced? As section I noted, Descartes in his sceptical guise — the Descartes of Meditation I — thought that this was indeed possible. No matter what evidence one has for one's belief having a normal genesis, there remains the epistemic possibility of its having been brought about by the evil demon. That possibility of the evil demon remains an *epistemic* possibility for one at each moment, because at any time all of one's *evidence* for there having been no evil demon involved in the genesis of one's belief could itself have been produced by an evil demon. And a sceptic could claim that the possibility of belief-freedom being part of the genesis of one's belief functions analogously in that respect to the possibility of a Cartesian evil demon being part of the genesis of one's belief. Each of these possibilities is an *epistemic* possibility for the believer. Indeed, each is an epistemic possibility which is ever-present and yet ever-*hidden* from the believer whose belief (according to the sceptic in question) is being prevented by the possibility in question from being knowledge. Thus, a belief might be freely — that is, indeterministically — produced without that indeterminism ever directly *revealing* to the believer its role in the belief's genesis. Even when an epistemic subject *seems* to form a belief deterministically (such as when she feels forced by her apparent perceptions of an external world to form, in an apparently involuntary way, an external world belief), this is compatible with the belief's actually being produced in an indeterministic way. The indeterminism need never be something of which the believer becomes aware, say. After all, even whatever evidence one might possess for one's ha-

ving lacked any freedom not to have formed the belief could *itself* have been formed indeterministically. Of course, in saying this I am not assuming that there is a compatibility between a belief's being deterministically produced and its being freely — indeterministically — produced. I am saying only that there is a compatibility between a belief's *seeming* (to the believer) to be produced deterministically and its actually being freely — indeterministically — produced. The former is logically *and* epistemically compatible with the latter — in just the way that a belief's seeming to be true, and its seeming to be produced in what we would regard as being a normal way, is logically and epistemically compatible with its actually being false and indeed with its actually being implanted in one by an evil demon. In this way, therefore, our sceptic will again insist that F2 is true. But now her support is fuller than before, *and* the logical form of this new sceptical support should remind us of the sort of reasoning upon which many more standard sceptical arguments, such as the classic Cartesian ones, are generally thought by sceptics to depend. And so our sceptic concludes, once more, that no matter what justification one has for one's having formed one's belief deterministically, there is still the epistemic possibility that one has not really formed that belief in that way. This (she tells us) suffices to establish F2.

VI

If you are not already a sceptic about people having knowledge, I do not expect that argument F will turn you into one. Other sceptical arguments have had long enough to do that, if they have not succeeded, no doubt F will not do so. However, if you are already a sceptic, you should welcome F. If you regard dreaming and evil demons as ge-

nuine sceptical possibilities, then belief-freedom, too, should have that status for you (I have argued for nothing stronger than that conditional in this paper) And thus does the non-sceptic's task become a touch more demanding Non-sceptics now have yet another battle to fight if they are to show that people do, after all, have knowledge I am not saying that it is a battle which they cannot win, I am simply noting its existence, as a way of thinking which is no less available to sceptics than are the more traditional sceptical challenges upon which they so willingly call

Keywords

Epistemological scepticism, free will, knowledge

Stephen Hetherington
 School of Philosophy
 The University of New South Wales
 Sydney 2052, Australia
 s hetherington@unsw.edu.au

Notes

¹ See, for example, *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford University Press, 1983), p 65, and *Metaphysics* (Westview Press, 1993), p 185

² There are different versions of epistemology's oft-cited distinction between internalism and externalism I am using a generalisation of my recent formulation of the distinction, in *Knowledge Puzzles* (Westview Press, 1996), chs 14, 15 An element of an analysis of an epistemic subject *x*'s being justified at time *t* in a belief that *p* is *internalist* if and only if (i) it purports to describe some aspect *A* of *x*'s being justified at *t* in the belief that *p*, and (ii) *A* is something of which, at *t*, *x* is, or could easily be, aware And an element of an analysis of *x*'s being justified at *t* in the belief that *p* is *externalist* if and only if (i) it purports to describe some aspect *A* of *x*'s being justified at *t* in the belief that *p*, but (ii) *A* is not something of which, at *t*, *x* is, or could easily be,

aware So, for example (and speaking roughly), *evidence* is generally considered to be internalist, while *reliability* and *causality* are paradigmatically externalist (And I am using the word "justification" systematically ambiguously, indifferently between both internalist and externalist analyses of justification)

³ Hilary Kornblith's well-known objection to the arguments-on-paper thesis supports this point "Beyond Foundationalism and the Coherence Theory", *The Journal of Philosophy* 77 (1980), 597–612 Kornblith argues that a belief is inferentially justified only if it is borne an appropriate causal relation by its justification

⁴ The so-called Gettier problem has been taken by many epistemologists to show that one's knowing does need to include one's being in appropriate external circumstances That putative problem is named for the challenge issued by Edmund Gettier "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" *Analysis* 23 (1963), 121–3

⁵ Here is an alternative formulation of this claim

Otherwise, the conjunction of the appropriate circumstances and the belief, even if the latter is true and accompanied by good evidence for its truth, is not knowledge

This would be an unusual formulation Standardly, the *belief* is what epistemologists say can be knowledge Even externalists say that the belief is what can be knowledge, they require only that there *also* be the appropriate circumstances playing some apt role, if the belief is to be knowledge But perhaps externalists should talk, instead, of knowledge as literally being the conjunction of the belief, its truth, the evidence (if there is any), *and* the external circumstances Aren't *internalist* views about knowledge being unnecessarily favoured by our continuing to talk of the belief as what can be knowledge?

⁶ If part of one's knowing that *p* is one's being in some appropriate external circumstances (apart from the circumstance of *p*'s being true), and if (as an element in one's knowing that one lacked freedom in coming to believe that *p*) one needs to know that *these* external circumstances have been formed deterministically, then one also needs to know of the applicability to one's case of a kind of determinism *other* than just belief-determinism If anything, though, this *strengthens* the sceptic's case, making it

even harder for one to know that there has been no freedom at all in one's coming to believe that p (The same is true if — as a foundationalist might claim — one's evidence, at some point in the full causal history of one's belief, might involve something internalist yet other than *beliefs* — for instance, something like sensory impressions)