

A PUZZLE FOR DOGMATISM

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ABSTRACT: I want to consider a puzzle in the realm of confirmation theory. The puzzle arises from consideration of reasoning with an argument, given certain epistemological commitments. Here is the argument (preceded by the stipulated justification for the first premise):

(JUSTIFICATION FOR 1) The table looks red.

(EK) (1) The table is red.

(2) If the table is red, then it is not white with red lights shining on it.

(3) The table is not white with red lights shining on it.

(EK) – the easy knowledge argument – has received much epistemological scrutiny of late. My aim, in this discussion note, is to set out an example, leading to the puzzle, putatively troubling for *dogmatism*. The puzzle takes the form of a pair of arguments which I take to be extractable from the recent work of a number of prominent epistemologists. My aim is modest: I seek not novelty, but rather merely to tie together accessibly some interesting recent work towards the formal end of epistemology which bears on cruxes at the heart of traditional epistemology.

KEYWORDS: dogmatism, perceptual justification, perceptual knowledge

0.1 I want to consider a puzzle in the realm of confirmation theory. The puzzle arises from consideration of reasoning with an argument, given certain epistemological commitments. Here is the argument (preceded by the stipulated justification for the first premise):

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0.2 The plan: First, I set out the epistemological commitments in play. Second, I set out an example, leading to the puzzle, putatively troubling for *dogmatism*. Finally, I consider the implications of the puzzle for dogmatism.

I. Epistemological Commitments

I.1. Suppose that the *mere having* of the experience described in (JUSTIFICATION FOR 1) can give one defeasible perceptual *justification*² to believe (1) – that is, it is the subject’s having the experience, rather than the subject’s beliefs about the experience, that makes it epistemically appropriate for the subject to believe (1).

¹ See, notably, Stewart Cohen “Basic Knowledge and the Problem of Easy Knowledge,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 65 (2002): 309-29, and “Why Basic Knowledge is Easy Knowledge,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 70 (2005): 417-30. The following structurally similar argument has also received much scrutiny (see, notably, Martin Davies, “Epistemic Entitlement, Warrant Transmission and Easy Knowledge,” *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 78 (2004): 213-45, and “Two Purposes of Arguing and Two Epistemic Projects,” in *Minds, Ethics, and Conditionals: Themes from the Philosophy of Frank Jackson*, ed. Ian Ravenscroft (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 337-83, James Pryor, “What’s Wrong with Moore’s Argument?,” *Philosophical Issues* 14 (2004): 349-78, and “When Warrant Transmits,” forthcoming in *Mind, Meaning and Knowledge: Themes from the Philosophy of Crispin Wright*, ed. Annalisa Coliva (Oxford: Oxford University Press), and Crispin Wright, “Facts and Certainty,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 71 (1985): 429-72, “Warrant for Nothing (And Foundations for Free?).” *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 78 (2004): 167-212, “The Perils of Dogmatism,” in *Themes from G.E. Moore: New Essays in Epistemology and Ethics*, eds. Susana Nuccetelli and Gary Seay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 25-48, and “Internal-External: Doxastic Norms and Defusing of Sceptical Paradoxes,” *Journal of Philosophy* 105 (2008): 501-17):

(JUSTIFICATION FOR 1) I am having a visual experience as of having hands.

(MOORE)

(1) I have hands.

(2) If I have hands an external world exists/If I have hands I’m not a handless BIV having pseudo-perceptual experiences as of hands.

(3) An external world exists/I’m not a handless BIV having pseudo-perceptual experiences as of hands.

The puzzle to come can, *mutatis mutandis*, be run apropos of (MOORE).

² ‘Justification’ is used in this paper as a broad term of epistemic appraisal and is interchangeable with ‘warrant.’

And we might go further in claiming that this justification can suffice to give one *knowledge* of (1). This supposition and claim are distinctive features of dogmatist accounts of justification and knowledge respectively.³ To refer specifically to dogmatism about justification I'll use 'j-dogmatism,' to refer to dogmatism about knowledge I'll use 'k-dogmatism,' and to refer to dogmatism generically I'll use 'dogmatism.' I take it the truth of k-dogmatism entails the truth of j-dogmatism; but the converse entailment does not hold.

Dogmatists are (necessarily?) *fallibilists* about knowledge: "[W]e can have knowledge on the basis of defeasible justification, justification that does not *guarantee* that our beliefs are correct."⁴ It's the defining feature of dogmatism that the justification one gets for (1) is *immediate*: you don't need antecedent justification for any other propositions in order for the having of the experience described in (JUSTIFICATION FOR 1) to give one justification for (1). Some find dogmatism an appealing way to think of perceptual justification and knowledge. So let's suppose, *pro tem*, we're fallibilists, in this dogmatist sense.⁵

I.2 At a highly general level, it seems that dogmatists must give some account of the defectiveness of (certain instances of) reasoning by means of (EK). Why so? Here's the worry: On a dogmatist view, the mere having of a perceptual experience (giving justification for and, say, knowledge of, (1)), combined with some elementary logical reasoning (via (2)), can seemingly lead us – *all too easily* – to knowledge of the falsity of certain sceptical hypotheses ((3)). Thus the *problem of easy knowledge*. Our ensuing puzzle for dogmatism may be viewed as a specific

³ See James Pryor, "The Skeptic and the Dogmatist," *Nous* 34 (2000): 517-49, and "What's Wrong with Moore's Argument?"

⁴ Pryor, "The Skeptic and the Dogmatist," 518. If one wants to frame fallibilism in terms of conditional probabilities (cf. Pryor, "Uncertainty and Undermining," available at <http://www.jimpryor.net/research/papers/Uncertainty.pdf>), one will claim that a subject, *S*, can know a proposition, *p*, when the probability of *p* conditional on *S*'s evidence, *e*, is less than 1. Note that conditional probabilities involve two propositions: one about the world, *p*, and one about the subject's evidence, *e*. But the subject does not have to believe the proposition about evidence in order to possess the evidence.

⁵ This supposition keeps things manageable. Our puzzle assumes fallibilism. But note one can (see John Hawthorne, *Knowledge and Lotteries* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2004), 75-7) give a rendering of a similar puzzle on the assumption of *infallibilism* (fallibilism's negation).

way of framing a puzzle *in the region of* this worry using tools from confirmation theory.⁶

II. Example, Leading to the Puzzle, for Dogmatism

II.1 Example: Let us, for simplicity, consider only red tables and white tables,⁷ and only red light and white (natural) light. Suppose that the prior probabilities are divided equally between red table (RT) (0.5) and white table (WT) (0.5) and in the ratio 1:2 between red light (RL) (0.33) and white light (WL) (0.67). So the prior probabilities of the four hypotheses (assuming the table colour and the light colour are independent) are: (RT&RL) 0.167; (RT&WL) 0.33; (WT&RL) 0.167; (WT&WL) 0.33.⁸ Now I have a visual experience as of a red table. We know that the posterior probabilities of the four hypotheses are proportional to the product of the prior probability and the *likelihood* (that is, the probability of the evidence given the hypothesis). Keeping things simple, suppose that the probability of a table looking red is the same given (RT&RL), or given (RT&WL), or given (WT&RL). And suppose (idealising) that the probability of a table looking red given (WT&WL) is zero. Then the posterior probabilities are: (RT&RL) 0.25; (RT&WL) 0.5; (WT&RL) 0.25; (WT&WL) 0. So, given the evidence described in (JUSTIFICATION FOR 1), the probability of premise (1) [that is, red table with either red light or white light] is raised from 0.5 to 0.75; the probability of premise (2) is 1 because it is a priori true; and the probability of the conclusion (3) [\sim (WT&RL)] is decreased from 0.833 to 0.75. That is, the probability of the 'sceptical' hypothesis, (WT&RL), is increased from 0.167 to 0.25 (essentially because one of the hypotheses, (WT&WL), has been eliminated by the evidence and its share of the prior probability has been redistributed amongst the remaining three hypotheses).

⁶ It is not clear to me *how similar* the ensuing problem for dogmatism is to the problem of easy knowledge. The more similar it is the more I might expect an answer to it to be found in some reconfiguration of my proposed solution to the problem of easy knowledge (Mark McBride, "Towards a Complete Solution to the Problem of Easy Knowledge," Unpublished paper). However, at this point, a method of implementing any such reconfiguration is not obvious to me.

⁷ One could, making things more realistic, generate a similar example by considering, say, 10 (equi-probable) colours the table might be.

⁸ Note: the prior probability assigned to the 'sceptical hypothesis,' (WT&RL), is low. It might seem like a *reasonable* prior, but it would not be acceptable to the (local) sceptic (cf. Wright, "The Perils of Dogmatism," and "Internal-External").

II.2 The foregoing worked example, though simplified and idealised, serves to support premise (iii) in the following argument against j-dogmatism, viz. getting (JUSTIFICATION FOR 1) diminishes the credence one ought to have in (3).⁹ Similarly, the worked example serves to support premise (iii*) in the subsequent argument against k-dogmatism. Here, first, is the argument against j-dogmatism:

(i) If one has justification to believe (1) after getting (JUSTIFICATION FOR 1), one has justification to believe (3) after getting (JUSTIFICATION FOR 1).

(ii) If having a certain experience diminishes the credence one ought to have in a proposition then, if one has justification to believe the proposition after having the experience, one must have had justification to believe the proposition antecedently to the experience.

⁹ In itself, that a piece of evidence disconfirms a hypothesis (known to be) entailed by a hypothesis which the evidence confirms is not problematic. Consider the following thesis (cf. Carl G. Hempel, "Studies in the Logic of Confirmation," *Mind* 54 (1945): 1-26, 97-121):

(CC) If E confirms H and H entails H' , then E confirms H' .

Due to counterexample(s), however, we have good reason to reject (CC). Consider: E = card is black, H = card is the ace of spades, and H' = card is an ace. Clearly, H entails H' while E confirms H but not H' . Note the following weaker thesis, however:

(CC*) If E confirms H and H entails H' , then E doesn't disconfirm H' .

The counterexample we considered to (CC) is not a counterexample to (CC*). Consider the following case, however:

Suppose you start with its being 80% likely for you that Clío's pet is a dog. Then you're informed that Clío's pet has no hair. One effect of this information is to raise the likelihood that her pet is an American Hairless Terrier, which hypothesis entails that it's a dog. But the information also decreases the total likelihood that Clío's pet is a dog. It makes it more likely that she owns a fish or a bird. So: evidence can give you more justification to believe P than you had before, you can know P to entail Q , and yet your evidence make you less justified in believing Q than you were before. (Pryor, "What's Wrong," 350-1.)

Our *puzzle* for dogmatism, however, is (in part) generated by the fact that for dogmatists *getting (JUSTIFICATION FOR 1) alone* putatively justifies, or confers knowledge of, (1) (unlike, *mutatis mutandis*, the foregoing two cases).

(iii) Getting (JUSTIFICATION FOR 1) diminishes the credence one ought to have in (3).

(iv) Therefore, if one has justification to believe (1) after getting (JUSTIFICATION FOR 1), one must have had justification to believe (3) antecedently to getting (JUSTIFICATION FOR 1).

(v) Therefore j-dogmatism is false: (JUSTIFICATION FOR 1)'s ability to provide justification to believe (1) is *not* independent of whether one has antecedent justification to believe (3).¹⁰

The argument against k-dogmatism is similar:

(i*) If one knows (1) after getting (JUSTIFICATION FOR 1), one is in a position to know (3) after getting (JUSTIFICATION FOR 1).

(ii*) If having a certain experience diminishes the credence one ought to have in a proposition, then if one is in a position to know the proposition after having the experience, one must have been in a position to know the proposition antecedently to the experience.

(iii*) Getting (JUSTIFICATION FOR 1) diminishes the credence one ought to have in (3).

(iv*) Therefore, if one knows (1) after getting (JUSTIFICATION FOR 1), one must have been in a position to know (3) antecedently to getting (JUSTIFICATION FOR 1).

¹⁰ I take something like this argument to be extractable from Roger White "Problems for Dogmatism," *Philosophical Studies* 131 (2006): 525-557, whose focus is specifically on j-dogmatism. Cf. also Stephen Schiffer, "Skepticism and the Vagaries of Justified Belief," *Philosophical Studies* 119 (2004): 161-84, and Wright, "The Perils of Dogmatism." Note premises (i) and (i*) each rest on a *closure* principle – I explore this further in section 3. Note also premises (iii) and (iii*) can form the basis for an explication of the phenomenon of *transmission failure* (cf. Samir Okasha, "Wright on the Transmission of Support: a Bayesian Analysis," *Analysis* 64 (2004): 139–146, Jake Chandler, "The Transmission of Support: a Bayesian Re-analysis," *Synthese* 176 (2010): 333-43, and Luca Moretti, "Wright, Okasha and Chandler on Transmission Failure," forthcoming in *Synthese*). And note finally that if one added a further premise to these arguments that *we don't in fact have* justification to believe – *aren't in fact in* a position to know – (3) prior to experiencing (JUSTIFICATION FOR 1), one would have the makings of a full-fledged argument for scepticism.

(v*) Therefore k-dogmatism is false: (JUSTIFICATION FOR 1)'s ability to confer knowledge of (1) is *not* independent of whether one is antecedently in a position to know (3).¹¹

Note that this second argument contains the locution 'in a position to know' at several junctures. I take it that one is in such a position just in case¹² one has (evidential) justification for the true proposition in question, and some anti-luck condition is fulfilled thwarting *Gettierisation*. Admittedly this account is vague and context-dependent at a number of points,¹³ but this working definition will do for our purposes.

I take it that, with these two arguments, we've fingered *the* major *puzzle* in confirmation theory for dogmatism. They purport to establish, *contra* dogmatism, that the role of a perceptual experience (of the table looking red) in providing justification to believe (1), and ultimately knowledge of (1), depends on an antecedently available justification to believe (3), or on being antecedently in a position to know (3). Each argument has three premises. Unless there is some flaw in the reasoning that takes us from the three premises to the interim conclusion, and thence to the conclusion, the dogmatist must finger a false premise. Each of the premises, however, is plausible.

III. Implications of the Puzzle

III.1 The arguments comprising our *puzzle* for dogmatism (see 2.2) are valid, so let's isolate a premise on which some doubt might be cast. An obvious move at this stage, given the apparent security of the second and third premises, is to flag premises (i) and (i*):

(i) If one has justification to believe (EK1) after getting (JUSTIFICATION FOR 1), one has justification to believe (EK3) after getting (JUSTIFICATION FOR 1).

(i*) If one knows (EK1) after getting (JUSTIFICATION FOR 1), one is in a position to know (EK3) after getting (JUSTIFICATION FOR 1).

¹¹ I take something like this argument to be extractable from Hawthorne, *Knowledge and Lotteries*, 73-5, whose (effective) focus is specifically on k-dogmatism. Cf. also Cohen, "Why Basic Knowledge is Easy Knowledge."

¹² I follow a standard philosophical practice of using 'just in case' as interchangeable with 'if and only if.'

¹³ Cf. Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 95.

Each premise, respectively, presupposes (something like) the following (single-premise) closure principles:

(J-Closure) If one has justification to believe P and can tell that P entails Q then – *ceteris paribus* – one has justification to believe Q.

(K-Closure) If one knows P and competently deduces Q from P, thereby coming to believe Q, while retaining one's knowledge that P, one comes to know that Q.

A defender of j-dogmatism or k-dogmatism wanting to question the truth of (i) or (i*) should offer reasons to reject *(J-Closure)* or *(K-Closure)*, respectively.¹⁴ But it's then noted that these are highly plausible closure principles. Thus dogmatism is – or seems very likely to be – false.¹⁵

¹⁴ See Maria Lasonen-Aarnio, "Single Premise Deduction and Risk," *Philosophical Studies* 141 (2008): 157-73, for an interesting exploration of so-called *deductive risk* – a phenomenon which provides a novel basis for questioning *(K-Closure)*. Elsewhere (Mark McBride, "Is Knowledge Closed Under Known Entailment? The Strange Case of Hawthorne's 'Heavyweight Conject' (and Other Strange Cases)," *Theoria* 75 (2009): 117-28, and Mark McBride, Lee Walters, "Sensitivity and Closure," Unpublished paper), I have also questioned *(K-Closure)*.

¹⁵ This work drew heavily on conversations with Martin Davies and Cian Dorr, who between them provided much of the material for this paper.