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## *The debasing demon*

JONATHAN SCHAFFER

So let her go; God sent her to debase me,  
 And aggravate my folly, who committed  
 To such a viper his most sacred trust  
 Of secrecy, my safety, and my life.  
 (Milton, *Samson Agonistes*)

What knowledge is imperilled by sceptical doubt? That is, what range of beliefs may be called into doubt by sceptical nightmares like the Cartesian demon hypothesis? It is generally thought that demons have limited powers, perhaps only threatening a posteriori knowledge of the external world, but at any rate not threatening principles like the *cogito*. I will argue that there is a demon – *the debasing demon* – with unlimited powers, which threatens universal doubt. Rather than deceiving us with falsities, the debasing demon would allow us true beliefs, but only as guesses.

I will draw three lessons from the debasing demon. The first lesson is that all knowledge is imperilled by sceptical doubt, even knowledge of the *cogito*. This clarifies the range of scepticism. The second and related lesson is that anti-sceptical strategies relying on a residue of knowledge immune from doubt cannot succeed. The debasing demon leaves no residuum. The third lesson is that deception and debasement do not exhaust the forms of sceptical doubt. In that sense, there are more demons in epistemic hell than are dreamt of in epistemology.

### 1. *The reach of demons*

What knowledge is imperilled by sceptical doubt? Never mind whether such doubts ultimately destroy any of our knowledge – just consider the prior question of what they threaten. It is sometimes thought that doubts only threaten a posteriori knowledge of the external world. As such, the following have often been thought immune from doubt: a priori knowledge, knowledge of the present contents of one's own mind, and knowledge of one's own present existence, *inter alia*. Indeed, there are even a few cases of a posteriori knowledge of the external world thought safe from doubt. Thus Unger (1975: 22), in the course of defending radical scepticism, allows that one might still count as knowing the disjunctive claim that either one has hands, or one is under the spell of a demon, or one is in some other sceptical scenario.

Descartes himself seems to waver on the range of sceptical doubt. On the one hand, the First Meditation begins (1984: 12) with the announcement of a project involving 'the general demolition of my opinions' which will require finding 'in each of them at least some reason for doubt', where the reason to doubt is to be found by challenging 'the basic principles on which all my former beliefs rested'. So the destructive project needs a demon that is at least wide ranging enough to imperil all Descartes had earlier believed. Moreover, Descartes (1984: 14) dismisses the dreaming hypothesis as insufficiently destructive because it does not suffice to call into doubt the truths of Arithmetic and Geometry. So given that the demon hypothesis *corrects* this insufficiency, the demon must be at least wide ranging enough to threaten the a priori truths of Arithmetic and Geometry. Thus Descartes (1984: 14–15), after introducing his deceiving demon, claims that he is: 'finally compelled to admit that there is not one of my former beliefs about which a doubt may not properly be raised...'

Yet, on the other hand, when Descartes turns to rebuilding knowledge, he appeals to both the *cogito*, and an a priori ontological argument for the existence of God. Then from the supposed residuum of (i) his knowledge of his own existence, plus (ii) knowledge that God would not be so evil as to allow clear and distinct ideas to be deceptive, Descartes would reconstitute human knowledge. So the reconstructive project seems to require limits to sceptical doubt. Moreover, the *cogito* itself seems immune from doubt. As Descartes (1984: 17) puts the point in the Second Meditation: 'I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something.' And thus by the Third Meditation (1984: 24) the *cogito* is said to be the 'first item of knowledge'.<sup>1</sup>

1 For further discussion of Descartes on the range of sceptical doubt, see Cottingham 1986 (especially chapters 2–3), Markie 1992, and Broughton 2002. Newman 2005 (especially §6) provides a useful overview of the issues, distinguishing the 'bounded doubt' and 'unbounded doubt' interpretations of Cartesian scepticism.

Or consider instead Russell's (1912: 22–23; cf. Vogel 1990, Bonjour 2003 and Beebe 2009) *abductivist* response to scepticism, on which scepticism is regarded as 'a less simple hypothesis, viewed as a means of accounting for the facts of our own life'. Bonjour (2003: 92) terms this sort of response the '*quasi-commonsensical* hypothesis'. One way to understand the abductivist is as starting from (i) our mental states, and (ii) abductive reasoning principles, as both being immune from doubt. From this seemingly secure basis, the abductivist posits the external world as the best explanation for regularities concerning these mental states. In this form at least, abductivism presupposes that there is no universal demon.<sup>2</sup>

Thus Russell (1912: 21–22) says that the abductivist solution, in order not to 'beg the very question at issue' must 'find in our purely private experiences, characteristics which show, or tend to show, that there are in the world things other than ourselves and our private experiences'. This presupposes that knowledge of the present contents of one's mind is immune from doubt – otherwise appeal to these experiences as premisses against the sceptic would beg the question after all.<sup>3</sup> Likewise Beebe (2009: 623), citing Bennett's discussion of Locke, says that the justification for abductive reasoning itself 'must be a priori', in order to avoid 'begging the question against the sceptic'. So presumably a priori reasoning is being supposed immune from sceptical doubt – otherwise appealing to it would indeed beg the question.

The Cartesian and Russellian answers to scepticism are examples of strategies that seek some residue of beliefs not called into doubt by the demon, and then try to reconstitute the remainder of our knowledge from this residuum. A universal demon would leave no residuum.

One further example: consider C. I. Lewis's (1946) *phenomenalist* reply to scepticism, on which statements about external world objects are to be analysed in terms of phenomenal states. If this is to serve as a reply to scepticism, then knowledge of our phenomenal states must be presumed immune from doubt – otherwise doubt merely re-arises at the phenomenal level. The phenomenalist reply is an example of the *anti-realist* approach to scepticism, which sees doubt as arising from the posit of a reality that goes beyond the appearances. Thus McGinn (1979: 115) takes it as a 'condition of adequacy' on an anti-realist view that it 'be seen manifestly to foreclose the threat of scepticism'. A universal demon would show that a retreat from reality to appearances could not possibly foreclose the threat.

2 Alternatively, the abductivist might simply presuppose knowledge of the present contents of one's mind and of the rationality of abduction, and only seek knowledge of the external world from this presupposed basis. A universal demon would not refute this more limited form of abductivism – rather it would show that this limited abductivism cannot stand as a general answer to scepticism, since its presupposed basis remains dubious.

3 Russell (1912: 22) goes on to acknowledge that 'we can never *prove* the existence of things other than ourselves and our experiences'. In saying this he seems to be presupposing that we *can* at least prove the existence of ourselves and our experiences.

A universal demon would thus leave us in a state of *cognitive homelessness*, in at least one sense of Williamson's phrase. In this sense, home is where sceptical doubts cannot assail us, where one is safe from demons, where at least 'ignorance is always removable' (2000: 94). Though on another conception of a cognitive home – one perhaps more central in Williamson – home is where 'nothing is hidden' (2000: 93) in the sense that we are at least *in a position to know* whatever happens at home. The debasing demon – soon to appear – does *not* threaten homelessness in this sense. (This demon lets us be in a position to know, but sinks us into irremovable ignorance by never letting us *capitalize* on this position.) Rather, the debasing demon would threaten us with *ignorance even at home*.

## 2. The debasing demon

Most discussions of scepticism focus on deception. Thus Descartes (1984: 15) imagines 'some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning' who 'has employed all his energies in order to deceive me'. And in imagining this Descartes (1984: 15) imagines 'that the sky, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds and all external things are merely the delusions of dreams which he has devised to ensnare my judgement'. The deceiving demon imperils knowledge via the truth requirement. He makes what is false seem true.

But truth is not the only requirement for knowledge, and so not the only haunt for demons. On the orthodox post-Gettier view, knowledge requires not just truth but also evidence, belief, and the proper connections between these conditions. These connections include (i) a connection between truth and evidence, proper when the evidence is *non-accidentally* connected with the truth; and (ii) a connection between evidence and belief, proper when one's belief is *based* on the evidence.

The debasing demon preys not on the truth requirement but rather on the basing requirement. She throws her victims into the belief state on an improper basis, while leaving them with the impression *as if* they had proceeded properly. So for instance, the debasing demon might force me into believing that I have hands on the basis of a blind guess or mere wishful thinking, while leaving me with the impression as if I had come to this belief on the basis of the visual evidence.<sup>4</sup>

4 Precursors of the debasing demon include Wright's (1991: 106) *maundering scepticism*, when competent intellection is precluded, and the following case mentioned in passing by Sosa (2003: 152), to suggest that justification has an aetiological aspect: 'You believe C as a conclusion of long and complex deductive reasoning, but your counterpart believes it only owing to the demon's caprice, although you would both now report having deduced C through complex reasoning, and each of you could now on demand produce some limited fragment of such reasoning... Are you both equally well justified?' (Thanks to Jonathan Vogel for these references.)

More precisely, the debasing demon can be conjured by acceptance of the following three plausible claims:

- (1) Knowledge requires the production of belief, properly based on the evidence
- (2) Any belief can be produced on an improper basis
- (3) It is always possible, when a belief is produced on an improper basis, for it to seem later as if one had produced a belief properly based on the evidence.

Claim (1) is nearly universally accepted in the post-Gettier literature.<sup>5</sup> Claim (2) may (though need not) be thought of as following from the claims that guessing is never a proper basis for knowledge, and that there is no restriction on what one might guess. I take (1) and (2) to be truistic.

Claim (3) is perhaps slightly more controversial. It is the assumption that one can always be wrong about how one reached a given belief. To paraphrase what Descartes (1984: 13) says about dreaming, there are never any sure signs by means of which having gone by a proper route can be distinguished from having gone by an improper route. To illustrate, I could presumably come to my belief that I have hands on the basis of the visual evidence, or I could come to it on the basis of wishful thinking. Here are two routes, only the first of which is epistemically proper. But I could have come to the belief that I have hands on the basis of wishful thinking, *while having the false impression that I came to this belief on the basis of the visual evidence*. To think otherwise would be to suppose that I have infallible access to some of the mental transitions in my past.

Given (1)–(3), the following sort of doubt may arise. For any given belief, the debasing demon may ensure that it was produced on an improper basis (by (2)). She may then make it later seem to the believer as if he had produced the belief properly (by (3)). And the result is that the believer becomes debased, in that his belief fails to satisfy the basing requirement for knowledge (as per (1)). So now I might wonder, do I actually know that I have hands, or was I merely guessing?

### 3. *Universal doubt*

The debasing demon threatens universal doubt, in the sense of threatening knowledge of any proposition  $p$ . Thus consider a priori knowledge. For instance, it seems that I know that all propositions of the form  $p \vee \sim p$  are

5 As Korc (2006) notes: ‘It is generally thought to be a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for a belief’s being justified that the belief be based on a reason’. The idea that guessing is incompatible with knowing is already explicit in Descartes’s (1985: 13) third rule to direct the mind, which runs: ‘[W]e ought to investigate what we can clearly and evidently intuit or deduce with certainty, and not . . . what we ourselves conjecture. For knowledge can be attained in no other way’.

true. But consider how I came to believe this. For this belief to be knowledge, according to (1), this belief must have been produced on the basis of certain evidence (perhaps by rational insight into the ideas of negation and disjunction). But by (2) it is possible to come to this belief in an improper way (perhaps I ignored the rational insight and operated by guesswork). And by (3), I might be wrong about how I came to the belief. So no matter how much it might now seem to me (*post facto*) as if I did not operate by guesswork, I still might have guessed all the same. The debasing demon thus threatens my knowledge that all propositions of the form  $p \vee \sim p$  are true, by raising the prospect that I actually produced this belief improperly.<sup>6</sup>

Or consider knowledge of the present contents of one's own mind. Suppose that I am now experiencing a particular tickling sensation. By (1), for my belief that I am now experiencing a tickling sensation to be knowledge, this belief must have been produced on the basis of certain evidence (presumably by introspecting my experiential state). But by (2) I could have come to this belief by wishful thinking, and by (3) there is no 'certain indication' I did not in fact use wishful thinking. The debasing demon thus threatens my knowledge that I am now experiencing a particular tickling sensation, by raising the prospect of an improper basis.

Or consider Descartes' own foundational principle, *cogito ergo sum*. It may well be true that I exist. Indeed, it may well be that the debasing demon scenario *requires* that I exist, so that I cannot possibly have a false belief about this. But knowledge requires more than just true belief! By (1), in order for me to know that I exist, I still must come to this belief from the evidence (perhaps by noting that I am thinking, and inferring that I must exist in order to be thinking). But by (2) I could have leapt straight to the belief that I exist (or come there by guesswork or by wishful thinking, etc.), and by (3) I might be misled as to how I came to this belief. The debasing demon thus threatens my knowledge that I exist, by raising the prospect that I produced this belief improperly. Perhaps we cannot be *deceived* about our own existence, but we can still be *debased*.

Or consider Unger's example of allegedly demon-safe a posteriori knowledge of the external world, the disjunctive proposition that either I have hands, or am under the spell of the demon, or in some other sceptical scenario (including perhaps the debasement scenario). Suppose that proposition is true, and I come to believe it. Still, this belief might itself have been formed as a guess, even if it might now seem otherwise.

6 In a related vein, Audi (1999: 206) characterizes a self-evident proposition as one meeting two conditions: '(a) in virtue of having that understanding, one is justified in believing the proposition. . . ; and (b) if one believes the proposition on the *basis* of that understanding of it, then one knows it'. The debasing demon is essentially capitalizing on Audi's point (b). She would prevent us from knowing even self-evident propositions, by preventing us from believing such propositions on a proper basis (understanding) and instead having us believe such propositions by guessing.

(Of course no actual demon is required. Indeed, nothing is required save the machinery of your own mind. Think of whatever mental transitions the demon would force you through. With debasing, think of the mental process that transitions from (i) improperly based belief formation, to (ii) belief production with a false impression of proper basing. All that is required is that you make these transitions. The demon forces such transitions, but so could a clever neurosurgeon, and so could chancy quantum transitions between brain states.)

The debasing demon thus stands as a universal demon. In this respect, the debasing demon seems *more nightmarish* than the deceiving demon. There may be limits as to how far we can be deceived (for instance if Descartes is right then we cannot be deceived about our own present existence), but there are no limits whatsoever to how far we can be debased.<sup>7</sup>

I also take no stance on whether the debasing demon is the *only* universal demon. Perhaps the deceiving demon is more powerful than is generally thought, and is somehow capable of threatening our knowledge of our own existence, etc. Or perhaps there are other demons in epistemic hell who can also lay claim to being universal demons. We are about to summon the horde.

7 Though there is also a respect in which the debasing demon might seem less threatening, for perhaps the most natural route from the possibility of debasement to actual ignorance goes through a questionable premiss from knowing to being in an evidential position to know that one knows (premiss (2)):

- (1) If one knows that  $p$ , then one believes that  $p$  on a proper basis
- (2) If one knows that  $p$ , then one is in an evidential position to know that one knows that  $p$
- (3) If one is in an evidential position to know that  $p$ , and  $p$  entails  $q$ , then one is in an evidential position to know that  $q$
- (4) So if one knows that  $p$ , then one is in an evidential position to know that one believes that  $p$  on a proper basis
- (5) One is not in an evidential position to know that one believes that  $p$  on a proper basis
- (6) One does not know that  $p$

That said, premiss (2) may be defensible. There are worries about those who lack the concept of knowledge or infinite belief-forming capacities, but (2) may even be weakened by weakening the consequent to ‘... then if one had the concept of knowledge and infinite capacities, then one would be in an evidential position to know that one knows that  $p$ ’. (5) would then need to be strengthened to ‘It is not the case the if one had the concept of knowledge and infinite capacities, then one would be in an evidential position to know that one believes that  $p$  on a proper basis’. So the argument may be revised to avoid the more obvious objections to (2). Moreover, if the history of the discussion of deception is any guide, there may well be other arguments from possible debasement to actual ignorance. In any case I should emphasize that I am not defending this argument (I am not defending scepticism!), but only engaging with the prior question of what sceptical arguments threaten.



#### 4. Towards a demonology

Deception and debasing are not the only haunts of demons, for truth and proper basing are not the only requirements for knowledge. On the orthodox post-Gettier view, knowledge requires not just truth but also evidence, belief, and the proper connections between these conditions. On this view, knowledge may be thought of as arising from a process starting from some worldly truth and culminating in apt belief:

*Truth* –[Non-accidentality]–> *Evidence* –[Basing]–> *Belief*

This picture of the process by which knowledge arises allows one to distinguish various sceptical threats. What a demon does may be characterized as follows. First, a demon dooms some non-final stage of the process (before belief), so that knowledge cannot arise. Second, the demon disguises some later stage (after the doomed stage) so as to erase the traces of doom.

And so, on the orthodox picture, there are actually *ten* different sorts of demon to be dealt with. A demon could doom the truth condition but disguise any of the four later stages of the process, or doom the non-accidentality condition but disguise any of the three later stages of the process, or doom the evidence condition but disguise any of the two later stages of the process, or doom the basing condition but disguise the remaining belief condition.

The deceiving demon is the sort of demon who dooms the truth stage by giving you a false belief, but disguises the evidence stage by making the false belief seem true. The debasing demon is the sort of demon who dooms the basing stage by forcing you to guess, but disguises the belief stage so that your belief seems properly based. There is also, for instance, a demon who dooms the truth stage but only disguises things at the stage of belief formation. In the hands of such a demon what is false would not seem evidentially to be true, but when one came to form beliefs one would suddenly be forced to believe all sorts of things about the external world *despite* the evidence. And there is also a demon who dooms the non-accidentality stage by constantly throwing you into Gettier situations in which the truth is only accidentally connected with the evidence, but who disguises this matter at the evidence stage. Thus there are more demons in epistemic hell than are dreamt of in epistemology.

It is the prerogative of a complete account of knowledge to determine the stages required for knowledge, and thus to determine a complete demonology. In general, given that knowledge arises from a process naturally articulated into  $n$  stages, there will be  $(n^2-n)/2$  sorts of demon. Thus the general formula for demon number is given by *the triangular function* on the number of stages of knowledge:  $f(1)=0, f(2)=1, f(3)=3, f(4)=6, f(5)=10, \dots$



Epistemology since Descartes has been haunted by the sceptical nightmare of the deceiving demon. For  $n$  stages of the knowledge process, things have just gotten  $(n^2 - n)/2$  times worse.<sup>8</sup>

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8 Thanks to David Chalmers, Stewart Cohen, Hilary Kornblith, Ram Neta, Wolfgang Schwarz, Jonathan Vogel, and the audience at *Epistemology at the Beach* in Kioloa.

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## Take the sugar

CASPAR HARE

Sometimes I lack all-things-considered preferences between items. Sometimes this attitude is *insensitive to mild sweetening*. There are items A, A+, B, B+, such that, all things considered, I have no preference between A and B, I have a preference for A+ over A, I have a preference for B+ over B, and yet I have no preference between A and B+, or between A+ and B.

The attitude may be turbulent, naturally described as one of ‘tortured ambivalence’:

### *The fire*

Firefighters are retrieving possessions from my burning house. Should I direct them towards the Fabergé egg in my drawing room or the wedding album in my bedroom? The Fabergé egg was commissioned by Czar Alexander III of Russia, as an Easter surprise for the Empress Consort. It has survived revolution, war and upheaval on a grand scale, and is now regarded as the finest relic of the gaudy, opulent Romanov dynasty. The wedding album, on the other hand, reminds me of happy times when my wife and I were young and careless. As I think, in turn, of losing the one or the other, my emotions and inclinations vacillate wildly, never settling down to the point where it would be fair to describe me as having an all-things considered preference between:

A: The firefighters saving the Fabergé egg.

and

B: The firefighters saving the wedding album.

Force me to choose and I will choose. But my choice will have an arbitrary flavour. And learning that there is a \$100 bill lying beside the egg or the album will not rid it of this flavour. When I compare B to:

A+: The firefighters saving the Fabergé egg, plus \$100.