

Anthony Brueckner

Essays on Skepticism.

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This book represents the fruits of a war that has been waged by Brueckner for the past twenty-five years against Cartesian skepticism. It consists of thirty-six essays, five of which are previously unpublished. In the helpful introduction Brueckner tells us that he has been particularly influenced by Hilary Putnam's *Reason, Truth and History*, Robert Nozick's *Philosophical Explanations* and Barry Stroud's *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism*. (These works together with Brueckner's essays and the recent founding of an entire journal dedicated to skepticism, the *International Journal for the Study of Skepticism*, testify to an upsurge of interest in the problem of skepticism.) However, the precise origin of the author's interest in this problem lies in a course taught by Richard Rorty in the early 1970s on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, read alongside Peter Strawson's *The Bounds of Sense*.

Brueckner's opponent throughout the book is the skeptic who says that it is logically possible that none of our beliefs are true. (Unusually in a book about skepticism, no varieties of skepticism are discussed, e.g., Pyrrhonian, Cartesian, mitigated etc.; the enemy is simply defined at the beginning of the book and remains constant throughout.) In search of allies, Brueckner firstly reviews the Kantian anti-skeptical strategies of Strawson's *Bounds of Sense* (1966) and Rorty's 'Verificationism and Transcendental Arguments' (1971), but he is in the end unimpressed; nor is he impressed with anti-skeptical arguments based on the principle of charity. He tends rather to favor the semantic anti-skeptical arguments of Tyler Burge and Hilary Putnam, but there are no knock-down anti-skeptical arguments in this book and nor does Brueckner claim there are. At most Brueckner occasionally ventures that this or that anti-skeptical argument appears to have some force; but for the most part he presents a catalogue of noble failures, from the sixties to the present day.

The twenty-five years over which Brueckner has attempted to tackle the problem roughly coincide with the discussion and widespread acceptance of Putnam's semantic externalism, the thesis that one's thoughts are not completely determined by 'internal' facts but are to some extent determined by the nature of the world one is in contact with. Putnam famously put forward this thesis with the help of the thought experiment in which we are asked to imagine alien beings in a distant galaxy enjoying what, in use and appearance, seems to be water; but which, upon analysis, turns out not to be H₂O. According to Putnam, upon this discovery we would no longer call that liquid water. Hence, his conclusion that water is necessarily H₂O.

It is this argument that both Putnam and Brueckner rely upon as a reliable toehold against the skeptic. But although Brueckner discusses how this argument might be developed and extended against the skeptic, he does not countenance the idea that the

skeptic might challenge this basic underlying argument. The skeptic might well challenge Putnam's intuition: if alien beings enjoy what in every respect of its use and appearance is water, would we really rename it upon discovering that its chemical composition is not H₂O? The skeptic might argue that we could not be sure that we would do such a thing. (Moreover, it should be added that it is not only skeptics who have challenged Putnam's intuition.) Here we have a major challenge to the presupposition underlying a family of anti-skeptical arguments, the family upon which Brueckner pins most of his hopes.

Although his book presents a thorough treatment of the problem of skepticism in relation to philosophy since c. 1966, one major question, undiscussed by Brueckner, is what is at stake in these debates. The idea that it is logically possible that none of our beliefs are true is raised only in philosophy, and it is nearly always raised on behalf of a phantom opponent. This might be taken to suggest that philosophers do battle in these debates not only to defeat skepticism but also on behalf of philosophy itself, in the belief that the autonomy and worth of philosophy depends upon its ability to discover objective truth. I presume that this is what Brueckner believes to be at stake, but it would have been interesting to hear him discuss this question.

The view that the autonomy of philosophy is at stake in these debates was Richard Rorty's view in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) (PMN) Rorty argues that Cartesian skepticism on its own terms is impossible to defeat but that the terms themselves are bogus: 'Skepticism and the principal genre of modern philosophy [epistemology] have a symbiotic relationship. They live one another's death, and die one another's life' (PMN 114). Furthermore, whilst epistemology continues to pursue the mirage of objective truth and to think of knowledge as a system of representation it will always be plagued by a skepticism that it cannot defeat, for: 'nothing can refute the skeptic—nothing can do what epistemology hoped to do' (PMN 294). However, if we abandon the idea of epistemology as first philosophy—in other words, if we abandon the idea that philosophy's first task is to create a representation of nature—then the problem of skepticism does not arise. Brueckner does not discuss this position, for he does not think that Rorty's approach to skepticism changed in any radical way between the early 1970s and PMN. In reference to PMN he notes, 'So far as I can tell, Rorty does not further develop his *Kantian* anti-skeptical strategy in that work' (24). But, this is to miss Rorty's point: he does not develop his Kantian anti-skeptical strategy because he rejects it as doomed to failure. According to Rorty skeptical and anti-skeptical arguments are inextricably bound up with the concept of knowledge as a system of representation. Insofar as philosophy relies upon this concept, Rorty's unique anti-skeptical response is to call for philosophy's demise.

However, if the distinctiveness of philosophy resides in the root problem of skepticism, would it follow that philosophy is without worth? This is not a question that either Rorty or Brueckner directly address.

One of Brueckner's more positive conclusions is as follows: 'In the end, the best I can do is to say that knowledge is *possible*. I can say that there are possible worlds in which people have hands and in which speakers in ordinary contexts truly say of such

people, “They know they have hands” (339-40). But the skeptic who says that it is logically possible that none of our beliefs are true might also admit this. Moreover the skeptic might recognize these worlds as the worlds of other non-philosophical disciplines—disciplines untroubled by skepticism. And, what is more, of all philosophers the skeptic might have the necessary detachment to explore these other worlds. Is skepticism then really as terrible as Brueckner seems to fear? I am not sure that it is.

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