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The *(Un)Holy Grail* of Epistemology

PAWEŁ J. ZIĘBA

Institute of Philosophy. Jagiellonian University in Cracow
Grodzka 52. 31-044 Cracow. Poland
pawelek.zieba@uj.edu.pl

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ABSTRACT: As formulated by Duncan Pritchard and John McDowell, epistemological disjunctivism is the claim that perceptual experience can provide the subject with epistemic justification that is reflectively accessible and externally grounded at the same time. Pritchard calls this thesis 'the *holy grail* of epistemology', since it reconciles two traditionally rival theories of justification, namely epistemic internalism and epistemic externalism. The main objection against epistemological disjunctivism thus understood is that it does not do justice to the well-known internalist intuitions expressed in The New Evil Demon and Brain-in-a-Vat scenarios. I defend epistemological disjunctivism from this objection by indicating that those who apply to such scenarios commit themselves to implausible views in the philosophy of mind. I conclude that epistemological disjunctivism accurately expresses the epistemological attitude of a non-reductive materialist regarding the body-mind problem.

KEYWORDS: Accessibilism – Brain-in-a-Vat – epistemic justification – epistemological disjunctivism – internalism-externalism distinction – mentalism – the body-mind problem – The New Evil Demon.

1. Introduction

Epistemological disjunctivism is a theory that arranges perceptual experiences and their subjectively indistinguishable hallucinatory and illusionary counterparts separately in view of their epistemic significance. John McDowell and Duncan Pritchard are the most enthusiastic proponents of

this claim. McDowell argues that epistemological disjunctivism is a compulsory assumption, the rejection of which would 'threaten the very idea of perceptual knowledge' (see McDowell 2013). Pritchard (2009, 472-473) describes epistemological disjunctivism as 'the *holy grail* of epistemology, in that it is offering a *bona fide* internalist conception of knowledge which is able to nonetheless allow that the rational support that one's belief enjoys can be genuinely truth-connected and thus skeptic-proof'.

Indeed, epistemological disjunctivism can be understood as a theory of epistemic justification that reconciles intuitions motivating two traditionally rival standpoints, namely internalism and externalism regarding justification. It does so by making justification reflectively (subjectively) accessible and externally grounded at the same time. The main objection against this claim is that it does not pass the test of 'The New Evil Demon'. Let us imagine a possible world in which our counterparts have experiences subjectively (qualitatively) identical to ours, yet beliefs based on these experiences are false because of the Evil Demon's malicious deeds. Though false, the mentioned beliefs are justified equally well as ours, says the internalist. However, the disjunctivist cannot agree. As Brent Madison puts it, "[according to disjunctivism] the factive mental states enjoyed by the subject in the normal world cannot be shared with their counterpart in the demon world since they are being deceived" (Madison 2010, 847). In other words, the combination of epistemic mentalism and access internalism that McDowell and Pritchard endorse is a form of epistemic externalism, not internalism (cf. Madison 2010, 845-846).[1]

I think that, though probably not as holy as Pritchard would like, the *grail* of disjunctivism still can be considered precious. It was mentioned that epistemological disjunctivism is a form of mentalism, namely the view that justification supervenes on the mental. However, if one holds some kind of a monist (e.g. materialist) position with respect to the body-mind problem, the internalist-externalist distinction concerning justification changes its meaning. The Evil Demon scenario is not a universal philosophical problem; it is a problem only for those who introduced it, namely ontological dualists.

[1] It is controversial whether McDowell and Pritchard understand epistemological disjunctivism in exactly the same way, as well as whether epistemological disjunctivism is committed to mentalism. I explain it further in Section 2.

In consecutive parts of this essay I explain what epistemological disjunctivism is, what are the main motivations behind it and how is it different from disjunctivism regarding perception (Section 2); I describe the objection against epistemological disjunctivism that seems to be the most important (Section 3); and finally I defend epistemological disjunctivism through the analysis of the meaning of the terms that are key to the proper understanding of this view (Section 4).

2. Epistemological disjunctivism

Disjunctivism is a philosophical theory that arranges perceptions and subjectively indistinguishable hallucinations separately as fundamentally different. What numerous versions of this theory differ about, is the property considered fundamental for perceptual experience and absent in its hallucinatory and illusionary counterparts. This is why disjunctivism regarding perception a.k.a. metaphysical disjunctivism should be distinguished from epistemological disjunctivism. The former might locate the aforementioned fundamental factor in the intentional content, phenomenal character or supervenience basis of perceptual experience, whereas the latter sees it in the epistemic significance.

According to McDowell's version of epistemological disjunctivism, perceptions and hallucinations belong to one genus: *seemings* i.e. experiences making a subject seem that things are 'such and so'. However, *seemings* have two species: *seeings* and *merely seemings*. The fundamental difference between these two regards their epistemic significance. *Seeings* do yield a conclusive warrant for knowledge, but *merely seemings* certainly do not. McDowell strongly emphasizes that we need to assume that at least some of our *seemings* are *seeings*, even if the difference between them might be subjectively undetectable in some cases. Otherwise the very possibility of perceptual knowledge would become questionable (cf. McDowell 2013; 2010, 244).

Moreover,

> in a non-defective exercise of [a perceptual] capacity its possessor is self-consciously equipped with an indefeasible, and so knowledge-constituting, warrant for belief about the environment. [...] When a belief owes its status as knowledge to a self-consciously possessed warrant, rationality is at work in the self-conscious possession of the warrant [...]. (McDowell 2010, 247)

I take this quote as confirming that McDowell and Pritchard share the core claim of epistemological disjunctivism, even if they might differ with regard to some details. To paraphrase Pritchard: paradigmatic cases of perceptual experience (i.e. *seeings*) provide the perceiving subject with perceptual knowledge. This knowledge consists of beliefs that have reflectively accessible rational support (see Pritchard 2012, 13-14).

Apart from putting the internalism-externalism debate to an end, the general motivation for adopting epistemological disjunctivism is to defend empiricism, the view that perceptual capacities of our senses allow us to get in touch with the mind-independent world and gain perceptual knowledge. However, the same goal stands behind other varieties of disjunctivism as well. For example, if a direct realist about perception uses disjunctivism as a rejoinder to the well-known argument from hallucination, her disjunctivism will also be of a transcendental flavor. This is because embracing any indirect theory of perception is basically making a concession to the sceptical threat located in the argument from hallucination.

Nevertheless, there is a significant difference between the two varieties of disjunctivism mentioned above. Namely, disjunctivism about perception shares its concerns with science and therefore is susceptible to scientific criticism. Epistemological disjunctivism, on the contrary, is a 'compulsory assumption' that makes science possible in the first place.

The inability to notice this crucial distinction seems to be the source of Tyler Burge's harsh animadversion of McDowell's formulation of the view in question. Burge bases his criticisms on the claim that if science groups all kinds of experiences (including hallucinations and illusions) under a fundamental category, philosophers should do that as well. Since disjunctivism arranges perceptions and hallucinations separately as fundamentally different with regard to their reference, Burge understands it as inconsistent with well-established science (cf. Burge 2011, 43). It is not that difficult to notice that Burge's criticism undermines the very evidence it relies on.

If we allow the possibility that all of our sense experiences are hallucinations, the difference between serious scientific research results based on empirical evidence and mere science-fiction or religious beliefs will simply disappear. The commonly accepted claim that empirical inquiry is a superior source of knowledge (as opposed to intuitions, mystical experiences, religious epiphanies, etc.) depends on acknowledging the special justificatory status of perceptual beliefs.

Of course, it does not mean that epistemological disjunctivism is immune on the philosophical battlefield as well. On the contrary, philosophical objections directed against disjunctivism are to the point and much harder to fight off.

3. Epistemic justification and radical scepticism

In his recent book, Pritchard delivers convincing rejoinders to many philosophical objections against epistemological disjunctivism (see Pritchard 2012). However, there is a specific kind of objection that still comes back in reviews and polemic articles. What is questioned by this objection, is the very *holiness* of the disjunctivist *grail*, namely the assumption that justification of a belief might be simultaneously externally grounded and reflectively accessible:

> is it really the case that a subject can know through his reflective capacities alone what his reasons are for a belief if those reasons are factive? (Madison 2010, 847)

> Why suppose that my reflectively accessible evidence must be provided by the factive mental state of seeing that I have hands, rather than the non-factive mental state of seeming to see that I have hands? (Smithies 2013)

After all, the bold claim that the possibility of this Evil Demon who makes sure that all of our *seemings* are nothing more than *merely seemings* can be rejected by mere reflection sounds pretty naïve.

Madison describes epistemological disjunctivism as a mixture of two different varieties of epistemic internalism: mentalism and access internalism. According to the former, "justification supervenes on the mental; there can be no justificatory difference without a mental difference"; whereas the latter "maintains that one always has 'special access' to one's justificatory status. So [...] all of one's beliefs, basic and non-basic alike, are such that not only are one's grounds accessible, but also [...] adequate" (Madison 2010, 844-845).[2] Although such a mixture is not in itself inconsistent, it is

[2] Pritchard thinks that epistemological disjunctivism is committed to accessibilism, whereas its connection with mentalism is moot. Nevertheless, he does not provide

nonetheless incompatible with the traditional internalist intuition, according to which our perceptual beliefs and corresponding beliefs of our counterparts in the Evil Demon world are equally justified. Epistemological disjunctivism requires that mental states on which justification supervenes are factive, while in the Evil Demon world they are clearly not factive. However, the reflectively accessible rational support for a perceptual belief seems to be the same in both cases.

To make sure that both cases are nonetheless different with regard to justification, Pritchard introduced the distinction between justification and blamelessness. In spite of the fact that our counterparts from the Evil Demon world are blameless in forming the same beliefs as we do, their beliefs, contrary to ours, are not justified (cf. Pritchard 2012, 42).

Even so, the concept of blamelessness does not seem to fully redeem us from sceptical threats. To see this, let us follow James Pryor's suggestion to compare three envatted brains. The first brain thinks irrationally and adopts false beliefs. The second is rational, but unbeknownst to him, epistemic standards of his thinking are defective. The third is rational and follows the same rules as we do. The intuitions prompted by this example are that only the beliefs of the third brain are justified, beliefs of the second and third are blameless, and finally the first brain's beliefs are not only unjustified, but also certainly not blameless (cf. Pryor 2001, 117). Epistemological disjunctivism seems to overlook these differences.

Furthermore, it might be objected that neither we, nor our counterparts from the Demon world are in a position to know by mere reflection whether our/their beliefs are of justified, or just blameless kind. Of course, Pritchard is right in claiming that

> it is far from obvious on closer inspection why possessing better grounds in favor of believing that one scenario obtains rather than another known to be incompatible scenario should entail that one thereby possesses the relevant discriminatory abilities to distinguish between the two scenarios. (Pritchard 2009, 474-475)

Notwithstanding, the choice of one scenario instead of another should be at least somewhat substantially motivated, and the bare disjunctivist thesis offered by Pritchard and McDowell might look to some like wishful

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any specific argument against tying all three claims together. See Pritchard (2012, 41, 58).

thinking, or even dogmatism. Fortunately, such substantiation might be given (see the next section).

At this point it might be noticed that the aforementioned objection against epistemological disjunctivism is of a twofold nature. The two ingredients of the disjunctivist mixture seem to be palatable to an internalist only when taken separately. When taken together, they pull each other down, and the internalist starts crying that someone is trying to feed him with some externalist poison. As Pryor's example suggests, from a mentalist perspective, the access thesis looks suspicious, since the mental states of a normally situated brain and its envatted counterpart are qualitatively identical. If, on the other hand, we start from the access thesis, the mentalist position becomes dubious.

The Smithies' objection can be considered as an illustration of this latter problem. Smithies claims that epistemological disjunctivism is compatible only with weak, but not with strong version of accessibilism. He defines both versions as follows:

> (1) Weak Accessibilism: if one has rational support for believing that *p*, then one is in a position to know by reflection alone that one has rational support for believing that *p*.
> (2) Strong Accessibilism: if one lacks rational support for believing that *p*, then one is in a position to know by reflection alone that one lacks rational support for believing that *p*. (Smithies 2013)

In a good case i.e. when a particular utilization of a subject's perceptual capacity puts her in touch with the mind-independent world, she has a self-consciously accessible factive rational support for a belief that *p* and finds herself in a position to know that *p*. In a bad case, however, though there is no self-consciously accessible rational support for a belief that *p*, the subject is not in a position to know that such support is absent. According to Smithies, such asymmetry leaves the possibility of the Evil Demon scenario open (cf. Smithies 2013).

Right now it seems that we will never free ourselves from the sceptical doubts. There will always be a possibility that either our brains are envatted, or that the Evil Demon is playing with our minds. Should the epistemological disjunctivist take these possibilities seriously? In what follows, I am going to argue that she should not.

4. The 'mental', the 'internal' and the 'accessible'

As Hilary Putnam has rightly put it, "when concepts are interlinked, [...] the philosophical task must be to explore the circle rather than to reduce all the points on the circle to just one point" (Putnam 1994, 516). Following this suggestion, we should take under consideration the meanings of words like 'mental', 'internal' and 'accessible' and check whether the critics of epistemological disjunctivism understand these notions in the same way as do the proponents of the criticized view.

We have already established that epistemological disjunctivism merges mentalism and access internalism. Mentalism claims that justification supervenes on the mental. But what does 'mental' refer to in this definition? What this question raises is the bone of a well-known philosophical contention, namely the body-mind problem. The use of the word 'mental' obliges the user to specify what position does she take with regard to this problem. Even if it is possible to use 'mental' in a neutral way, it is nevertheless unacceptable in the present context, as it opens the door for equivocation and misunderstanding.

So how should we understand 'mental' in the present context? Given that interactionist dualism a.k.a. Cartesianism is not very popular nowadays, it seems quite unlikely that critics of epistemological disjunctivism are such dualists. On the other hand, why would they refer to the possibility of the Evil Demon if they were not Cartesianists? It is a Cartesian idea after all, and it would be hard to imagine the Evil Demon maliciously misleading us in the materialistic world. So, whenever one refers to the Evil Demon world in her argument, she basically refers to the world made of *res extensae* and *res cogitantes*. Although it is indeed metaphysically possible that such description matches with the state of affairs in the actual world, such possibility is not very plausible. The criticism of interactionist dualism is ubiquitous in the contemporary philosophy of mind.[3] Here it should be enough to point out that adopting this view obliges one to perform a presumably unfeasible task of explaining the interaction between the two radically different substances. Rather than reaching this goal, interactionist theories of mind seem to do the work of confirming the naturalist insight

[3] An overview of the most common objections against interactionist dualism (a.k.a. ontological dualism or substance dualism) can be found in Lowe (2000, 21-29).

that any attempt to explain something through the appeal to a supernatural cause will be completely fruitless.[4]

However, sceptical doubts might be raised from the materialist standpoint as well, and the Brain-in-a-Vat scenario is the best example here. Notwithstanding, the plausibility of this scenario also seems to require embracing a quite extreme position regarding the body-mind problem. Such scenario assumes the possibility of envatting a living brain and artificially stimulating it with an enormously wide range of phenomenal experiences, exactly like those we all receive in every second of our lives. It is hard to imagine how such scenario could be true without the truth of reductive or eliminative materialism. Yet, the artificial stimulation of specific phenomenal experiences in the brain is not possible at the moment, and might be never possible. Thought experiments about the neurobiologist Mary and philosophical zombies, though not able to completely falsify materialism, suggest that even if we built such a machinery, we would not be able to determine if it works. To cite Putnam once more,

> the idea of a theoretical reduction [...] of the entire body of psychology implicit in our ordinary practices of mental-state attribution to physics cum computer science – is without any clear content. One cannot make precise the unexplained notion of "identity" of "sense data" with "functionally characterizes states of the brain" with the aid of the concept of the reduction of one theory to another if one has no idea of the nature of the theory *to which we are supposed to do the reducing* (and only a very problematic idea of *what theory we are supposed to reduce*). (Putnam 1994, 481)

Given that the extreme versions of materialism are just as implausible as dualism, we are left with some sort of non-reductive materialism. Many theories fit into this general description; it is enough to say that they all agree that there is only one kind of 'stuff' in the Universe, although it can-

[4] Contemporary proponents of interactionist dualism follow the path of Descartes in locating the door to the mental somewhere in the brain. Despite the very elaborate character of these theories, the assumption of a radical difference between the mental and the physical makes any such attempt seem completely *ad hoc*. Examples of such theories can be found in Eccles – Popper (1977); or in Atmanspacher (2011).

not be described in one homogenous language.[5] On this picture, the descriptions of mentality that different disciplines of science provide us with (psychological, neurobiological, physical, etc.) are not fully translatable to each other. Rather, they complement one another.

The assumption that the mental is made of the same 'stuff' as the physical has important implications on how 'internal' and 'accessible' should be understood. First of all, the very internal-external distinction becomes conventional. There is no need for abandoning it, albeit we should be aware that the border between the two is not as sharp as some might think.

The non-reductive materialism is committed to the claim that every mental state, including conscious perceptual experiences, supervenes on some specific brain state. It seems obvious, in turn, that this brain state supervenes on the state of its environment. Given the causal closure of the physical world, every brain state supervenes on the state of the world in which this brain exists. After all, brains usually do not float in the void (and even being in the void would affect their state quite dramatically). Supervenience is a transitive relation, so if it is true that (1) every mental state supervenes on some specific brain state and (2) that brain state supervenes on the state of the world that contains the brain in question, as a result, it logically follows that (3) mental state supervenes on the state of that world. It would not make any sense to hold that a mental state depends on the state of the brain, yet this very brain state does not depend on the state of its environment. Even in cases where the subject is deprived of any external stimuli and her brain produces hallucinations on its own, the very lack of such stimuli creates an environmental basis for these experiences. Long story short, the internal is so permeated with the external, that the idea of a total separation of these two domains is nonsensical.

The above reasoning is indebted to the philosophy of George Berkeley. In the history of philosophy, the Bishop of Cloyne is commonly known as a proponent of immaterialism. Briefly, his argumentation goes as follows: representationist materialism leads to scepticism because if our entire knowledge about the world comes from representations, we cannot be sure whether these representations refer to what we think they refer to (if they

[5] Among theories that fit into this category are those of Donald Davidson and John Searle. Perhaps panpsychism fits here as well. A more general outline of such line of thought can be found in: Howell (2009).

refer to anything at all).[6] However, even short analysis of his writings shows that the real target of Berkeley's criticism is not materialism, but ontological dualism. And this is because by 'materialism' Berkeley means the thesis that 'matter exists', not necessarily that 'everything is matter'. This is precisely why he understands philosophers like Locke or Descartes as 'materialists'. The key insight of Berkeley's philosophy is that ontological dualism leads to scepticism. He understood that if we allow two kinds of 'stuff' in the Universe and put ourselves as *res cogitantes* on one side of the border between the two, the question of our access to the second part of the realm (*res extensae*) will always generate sceptical doubts. His solution to this difficulty was to assume that the Universe is made of only one kind of 'stuff', namely 'spiritual stuff'.[7]

The attenuation of the internal-external distinction diminishes the problem of access. If the perceiving subject is made of the same kind of 'stuff' as the object perceived, there is no problem for them to get in touch with each other, at least in principle. If epistemic justification supervenes on the mental, and the mental supervenes on the physical (as the non-reductive materialism requires), then, by transitivity of supervenience, justification supervenes on the physical. Of course, the possibility of perceptual error is still there. The subject might hallucinate or inaccurately conceptualize the phenomenal material provided by the experience. Gettier cases might happen as well. Yet, the point is that such possibilities are local, not

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[6] Berkeley (1710, §87) says: "Colour, figure, motion, extension, and the like, considered only as so many sensations in the mind, are perfectly known, there being nothing in them which is not perceived. But, if they are looked on as notes or images, referred to things or archetypes existing without the mind, then are we involved all in scepticism. (...) for aught we know, all we see, hear, and feel may be only phantom and vain chimera, and not at all agree with the real things existing in rerum natura. All this scepticism follows from our supposing a difference between things and ideas, and that the former have a subsistence without the mind or unperceived. It were easy to dilate on this subject, and show how the arguments urged by sceptics in all ages depend on the supposition of external objects."

[7] Berkeley (1710, §2) writes: "MIND-SPIRIT-SOUL. But, besides all that endless variety of ideas or objects of knowledge, there is likewise something which knows or perceives them, and exercises divers operations, as willing, imagining, remembering, about them. This perceiving, active being is what I call MIND, SPIRIT, SOUL, or MYSELF. By which words I do not denote any one of my ideas, but a thing entirely distinct from them, WHEREIN THEY EXIST, or, which is the same thing, whereby they are perceived – for the existence of an idea consists in being perceived."

global. They are exceptions from the rule, according to which our senses are the source of perceptual knowledge. Given all these considerations, there is no exaggeration in Pritchard's claim that a rational support for a belief might be reflectively accessible and factive at the same time.

However, it should be strongly stressed that this is not some kind of a naïve circular argument. I am not claiming that epistemological disjunctivism is true because non-reductive materialism is true. Rather, I claim that epistemological disjunctivism accurately expresses the epistemological attitude of a non-reductive materialist regarding the body-mind problem. Moreover, I claim that those opponents of epistemological disjunctivism who base their criticism on The New Evil Demon and Brain-in-a-Vat scenarios are forced to take implausible positions concerning the body-mind problem. I also think that the attitude of a particular internalist towards the epistemological disjunctivism can be seen as a gauge measuring whether she really is just an epistemic internalist (she simply thinks that epistemic justification is reflectively accessible and/or internal to the subject) or is she a sceptic and/or an ontological dualist in disguise.

What also seems to follow from the above considerations, is that the *grail* of disjunctivism is not as *holy* as Pritchard would like. Taken alone, it is just a normative position that tells us how to categorize our perceptual experiences. Without further argumentation, it is still susceptible to sceptical attacks. Therefore, though epistemological disjunctivism does not necessarily imply its metaphysical counterpart, only together they can effectively protect us from scepticism.

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