Synthese
DOI 10.1007/s11229-015-0683-7

Epistemological disjunctivism and easy knowledge

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Received: 24 July 2014 / Accepted: 5 February 2015

Abstract Stewart Cohen argues that basic knowledge is problematic, as it implies that subjects can acquire knowledge or justified beliefs about certain matters in ways that are supposedly too easy. Cohen raises two versions of the problem of easy knowledge, one involving the principle of closure and the other track-record style bootstrapping reasoning. In this paper I confront the problem of easy knowledge from the perspective of epistemological disjunctivism about perception. I argue that disjunctivism can do a better job than dogmatism at responding to the version of the problem involving closure. I also argue that while disjunctivism would permit subjects to bootstrap their way to justified beliefs about the reliability of their perceptual powers, the disjunctivist can distinguish in a principled manner between this sort of bootstrapping and instances of it that we should agree are objectionable.

Keywords Epistemological disjunctivism · Dogmatism · Easy knowledge · Bootstrapping

How can we come to know that certain putative knowledge sources are reliable? One way to answer this question is to argue that some knowledge is *basic* knowledge, or knowledge that can be acquired without knowledge that its source is reliable (Cohen 2002, p. 309). If basic knowledge is possible, it can provide the foundation on which knowledge of the reliability of our knowledge sources is based. However, Stewart Cohen has argued that basic knowledge is problematic, insofar as it implies that subjects have abilities to acquire knowledge or justified beliefs about certain matters in ways that are supposedly "too easy." This is the problem of easy knowledge, and Cohen presents two versions of it. The first is that given the principle of closure under

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Published online: 18 February 2015

known entailment, basic knowledge would enable us to infer that we are not being misled by our knowledge sources. The second is that basic knowledge would license us to illegitimately bootstrap our way to a justified belief that our knowledge sources are reliable.

The problem of easy knowledge has generated a substantial literature.[1] In this paper I will be responding to the problem from a perspective that has thus far been absent from the conversation, namely, that of epistemological disjunctivism about sense perception. I will be focusing on sense perception for two reasons. First, I think sense perception provides a model for thinking about some other sources of knowledge, such as memory and rational intuition. Second, insofar as it seems likely that our knowledge of the reliability of sense perception must itself be based at least in part on sense perception, it is plausible that basic knowledge will play a role in the explanation of how we know that our senses are reliable.

I begin in Sect. 1 by clarifying the concept of a knowledge source. In particular, I distinguish two things that might be referred to by this concept, and two corresponding ways of understanding basic knowledge. Section 2 is devoted to an explanation of epistemological disjunctivism, which allows for basic knowledge in both senses I distinguish. I also briefly compare epistemological disjunctivism with dogmatism. In the final two sections of the paper I then return to the problem of easy knowledge. In Sect. 3 I argue that the epistemological disjunctivist can do a better job than the dogmatist at responding to the version of the problem involving closure. Finally, in Sect. 4 I respond to the bootstrapping version of the problem. I contend that while epistemological disjunctivism does permit some instances of bootstrapping, the disjunctivist has the resources to distinguish in a principled manner between the instances of bootstrapping it licenses and instances that it should be agreed are absurd. The solution to both versions of the problem of easy knowledge will turn on the idea that perception puts subjects in a position to know facts about their environment by presenting environmental objects to them.

1 Sources of knowledge

The idea of a knowledge source admits of more than one analysis. Consequently, so does the notion of basic knowledge, since basic knowledge is defined as knowledge that can be acquired without knowledge that its source is reliable. Following Sosa (2009, pp. 212–215), I will say that talk of a knowledge source may refer either to a ground on which a belief that is a case of knowledge is based or to a faculty that gives rise to knowledge.

First, we may speak of the ground on which an instance of knowledge is based as its source. The ground is the epistemic state that is one's reason for holding a belief that is a case of knowledge. For instance, I may know that there is a tree in front of me at time t, where the reason for my belief is the fact that I am having a visual experience

[1] Discussions devoted to the problem or aspects of it include Bergmann (2004, 2006, Chap. 7), Black (2008); Cohen (2002, 2005, 2010); Douven and Kelp (2013); Markie (2005); Neta (2005); Pryor (2004), Sosa (2009, Chap. 10), Titelbaum (2010); Van Cleve (2003); Vogel (2008); Weisberg (2010) and White (2006).

of a certain sort. Evidentialists affirm that every belief that counts as an instance of knowledge must have a source in this sense, while some externalists deny it. However, the term "knowledge source" might also reasonably be taken to refer to an epistemic power or faculty, e.g., the faculty of vision rather than a type of visual experience. Let us say that if a faculty F can be truly described as the source of one's knowledge that p at t, then F "gives rise" to the knowledge that p at t. Different epistemological theories provide different accounts of what it is for a faculty to give rise to knowledge. Some externalists speak as if our perceptual faculties give rise to perceptual knowledge in the strong sense of directly producing perceptual beliefs that are instances of knowledge. On my own view, our perceptual faculties give rise directly to perceptual states that put us in a position to know certain facts. We acquire knowledge only when we base appropriate beliefs on these states in appropriate circumstances. Forming appropriate perceptual beliefs in light of perceptual states is not something done by the perceptual faculties themselves, but is an exercise on the part of the subject of her rationality. On this view, our perceptual powers give rise to knowledge only in the weak sense of yielding states that function as grounds on the basis of which we form perceptual beliefs that are cases of knowledge.

The notion of the reliability of a source must also be understood differently depending on whether it's the reliability of a ground or the reliability of a faculty that is at issue. A ground, g, for a subject's belief b is a reliable ground when g is an instance of a relevant type G and b is an instance of relevant type B such that when beliefs of type B are formed on the basis of grounds of type G, those beliefs tend to be true (Sosa 2009, pp. 213–214).[2] In this case, we can say that a subject's ground g is a reliable indicator of the truth of her belief b. On the other hand, a faculty F is a reliable epistemic power when the beliefs that F gives rise to tend to be true.

It may be thought that the distinction between the reliability of a ground and the reliability of a faculty is not important enough to bother making. It will seem this way if one assumes both that every belief that is an instance of knowledge is based on a ground supplied by a corresponding faculty and that every ground is just as reliable as its corresponding faculty. But neither of these assumptions is obviously true. As I already mentioned, some externalists reject the first assumption. But even if one accepts it, one might reject the second assumption. Suppose that a certain faculty F is reliable, since it often yields grounds that put its subject in a position to know something about her environment, but that it is also liable to defective actualizations. When the faculty operates defectively, the grounds it delivers are not reliable grounds, or at least they are not as reliable as the ones it delivers when it is working as it should. In this case, if F does not operate defectively very often it is still a highly reliable faculty, yet the grounds it delivers in its defective actualizations may not be so reliable.

Finally, the fact that we can draw the distinction between the reliability of a faculty and the reliability of a ground means that we can also distinguish two possible sorts

[2] Given that token beliefs and token grounds for beliefs fall under multiple types, and that the reliability of a given ground for a given belief will vary depending on the way those beliefs and grounds are typed, a restriction to relevant types is necessary (cf. Conee and Feldman 1998). I won't provide an account of relevance here, though I assume that some such account can be provided.

of basic knowledge. Let us say that faculty-basic knowledge is knowledge that can be acquired without knowledge that the faculty that gives rise to it is reliable and that ground-basic knowledge is knowledge that can be acquired without knowledge that the ground on which it is based is reliable. The distinction between these two senses of a knowledge source, and the corresponding distinction between faculty-basic knowledge and ground-basic knowledge, are not always clearly drawn. As a result, different writers sometimes have different things in mind when they discuss knowledge sources and basic knowledge.[3] I think it will be helpful to keep these distinctions in mind in what follows.

2 Epistemological disjunctivism

Let us say that a "genuine perceptual experience" is the sort of experience that a subject enjoys in paradigmatic cases of perceptual knowledge and that contrasts with forms of experience such as hallucinations and illusions. Epistemological disjunctivism (hereafter also simply "disjunctivism") makes the following three claims. First, genuine perceptual experiences present or reveal environmental entities to their subject. Second, as a result, they put their subject in a position to know certain facts about her environment; and third, they do so by providing the subject with reasons to believe certain propositions about things in her environment that are both conclusive and reflectively accessible.[4]

For example, suppose I am in my yard in the noonday sun. I am looking at a child's toy, an inflatable red ball, located five feet directly in front of me, and as a result I am enjoying a genuine perceptual experience. This experience is contentful, and on the view that I prefer (at least for the case of vision) the content of the experience is a certain object, a spatiotemporal continuant that exists independently of my perception of it.[5] Moreover, the object as it figures in the experience's content is not "bare" but has certain perceptual properties, for instance, a certain color, shape, and location in some region of egocentric space. In my example, the content of my experience might

[3] For example, when they discuss the bootstrapping version of the problem of easy knowledge Van Cleve (2003) and Neta (2005) interpret the claim that perception is reliable as a claim about the reliability of perceptual grounds, whereas Markie takes it to concern the reliability of our faculty of perception (2005, p. 411).

[4] My formulation of epistemological disjunctivism is indebted to McDowell (1982, 2011, 2013), and to Pritchard (2012). Epistemological disjunctivism is distinct from another theory in the philosophy of perception that also has a claim to be called disjunctivist, namely, naïve realism. According to naïve realism veridical experiences have mind-independent objects as constituents. The naïve realist thus affirms that subjects who suffer from hallucinations undergo a different kind of experience from subjects who enjoy veridical experiences (cf. Martin 2002, 2004, 2006). Naïve realism is motivated by considerations related to the metaphysics and phenomenology of perceptual experience while epistemological disjunctivism is motivated by epistemological ones, and the relation between the two theories is not a simple one. While it is natural for someone who holds naïve realism to hold epistemological disjunctivism (Fish 2009, p. 24), some metaphysical theories of perceptual experience that reject naïve realism may also be compatible with epistemological disjunctivism (Logue 2011, Sect. 2).

[5] An alternative view is that the content of a perceptual experience is a state of affairs (McDowell 2013, p. 145). Nothing of significance in what follows will hang on which of these alternatives is adopted.

thus be partially specified as a red, spherical object, located five feet directly in front of me.[6]

According to the disjunctivist, genuine perceptual experiences have content and they *present* or *reveal* their content to their subject's consciousness, thereby putting her in a position to know certain facts about her environment. So when I look at the ball, my experience presents or reveals to me something red, something spherical, and something located five feet in front of me. As a result, I'm in a position to know certain facts about my environment. E.g., since my experience reveals to me something red, spherical, and in front of me I'm in a position to know that there's a red object in front of me, that there's a spherical object five feet from me, that *that* spherical object is red, and that *that* red spherical object is located five feet from me.

The disjunctivist also contends that I'm in a position to know these things because my experience provides me with reasons to believe them that are both (a) conclusive, and (b) reflectively accessible. If my experience *presents* or *reveals* to me something red, spherical, and in front of me, then this guarantees that there is an object in front of me that is red and spherical. I thus have a conclusive reason to believe that there is something red and spherical in front of me. And, the disjunctivist claims, the reason I have for believing this proposition is reflectively accessible to me, where to say that a certain reason is reflectively accessible to a subject means that the subject is able to come to know that she has this reason through reflection alone, without having to engage in additional empirical enquiry. So if I'm asked why I believe there's a red spherical object in my environment I can reply straight off, "Because I see a red sphere" or (more stiltedly) "Because my perceptual experience is revealing to me a red sphere." "I see a red sphere" and "my perceptual experience is revealing to me a red sphere" are two ways of expressing the conclusive reason to believe there is a red sphere in my environment that my perceptual experience provides and that I have reflective access to in virtue of enjoying the experience.

The most controversial aspect of the disjunctivist view is its claim that the rational support for appropriate propositions provided by a subject's genuine perceptual experience is both conclusive and reflectively accessible. This claim is radically at odds with the most common view about what sort of facts are reflectively accessible. This is because the common view accepts, whereas the disjunctivist denies, the *highest common factor thesis*. If we let "the good case" refer to a case in which a subject is enjoying a genuine perceptual experience, and "the corresponding bad case" refer to the case in which she is undergoing a hallucination that is introspectively indistinguishable from the good case, then we can define the highest common factor thesis as follows:

> HCF: the only facts that are reflectively accessible to a subject in the good case are ones that would be reflectively accessible to her in the corresponding bad case.

[6] There is bound to be some restriction on what properties of an object can figure in the content of a perceptual experience. Since color, shape, and location in egocentric space are the most obvious perceptible qualities of objects, they are the ones that figure in my illustration.

Consider the hallucinatory case that corresponds to the case in which I enjoy the genuine perceptual experience of a red spherical object in front of me. In this case my experience cannot be revealing to me a red spherical object, since there is no such object. Rather, the hallucinatory experience merely *appears* to reveal to me a red spherical object. While the fact that the experience appears to reveal to me a red spherical object may be reflectively accessible to me, this fact is not a conclusive reason to believe there is a red spherical object in front of me, since it is compatible with there being no red spherical object there. Therefore, for all I have reflective access to in the bad case it could be that there is no red sphere located in front of me. And if we adopt HCF we must conclude that even in the good case, in which I am enjoying a genuine perceptual experience of a red spherical object in front of me, I do not have reflective access to something that could constitute a conclusive reason to believe there is a red sphere in front of me.

Inasmuch as it accepts HCF, the common view about reflective accessibility does not allow that in a case of genuine perceptual experience the subject has reflective access to conclusive reasons to believe appropriate propositions about environmental objects. However, the epistemological disjunctivist is committed to denying HCF. Therefore, she will not infer from the fact that good cases of genuine perceptual experience are introspectively indistinguishable from corresponding bad cases that in the good cases the subject lacks reflective access to conclusive reasons to believe appropriate propositions about her environment. While it is true that in the bad case the strongest reason that the subject has reflective access to for believing there's an F-ish object in her environment is that her experience *appears to be revealing* an F-ish object to her, in the good case the strongest reason she has reflective access to for believing there's an F-ish object in her environment is that her experience *is revealing* an F-ish object to her.[7]

Of course, in this sketch of epistemological disjunctivism I cannot resolve all the questions or worries that can be legitimately raised about it. Given that my goal is to demonstrate the strengths of disjunctivism in relation to the problem of easy knowledge

[7] If in a good case I have reflective access to a conclusive reason to believe that something is F, then not only can I come to know that it is F on this basis, I can also deduce, and thereby come to know, that I am in a good case and not in a corresponding bad one. But this raises the question: if I can know, in this way, that I am in a good case rather than a bad case, how can it be that I cannot introspectively distinguish between being in the good case and being in the bad one? Pritchard helpfully answers this question by drawing a distinction between "favoring epistemic support" and "discriminatory epistemic support" (2012, pp. 79–80). Any evidence for p is evidence that counts in favor of the truth of p, and in doing so constitutes favoring epistemic support for p. However, not all favoring epistemic support is discriminating support, or support that is tied to a capacity to discriminate that p has obtained rather than an alternative incompatible proposition. The distinction between favoring and discriminatory epistemic support is well motivated independently of disjunctivism. For instance, I have some evidence that the creature I see on my tree is a cardinal rather than a holographic projection of a cardinal, but I do not have this evidence in virtue of an ability to discriminate between cardinals and cardinal-holograms. Rather, it is due to my background knowledge, e.g., that cardinals are common in my neighborhood and that no one has reason to project a hologram of a cardinal onto my tree. By invoking the distinction between favoring and discriminating support, we can say that when I'm in a good case, my perception of something as F provides epistemic support for knowing it is F rather than that it merely appears to be F that is favoring support but not discriminatory support. This is why I can then deduce (and thereby come to know) that I'm in a good case rather than the corresponding bad case and yet be unable to introspectively distinguish between the good case and the bad case (ibid., 97).

and not to offer a more general defense of it, I will not consider most of these worries.[8] But there is one that is serious enough to merit at least a brief response. Disjunctivists contend that in a case of a genuine perceptual experience a subject has reflective access to conclusive reasons to believe appropriate propositions about her environment. This raises the following question: given that for any genuine perceptual experience there is a corresponding bad experiential state that is introspectively indistinguishable from it but does not provide a conclusive reason for believing appropriate propositions about environmental objects, *how* in the case of a genuine perceptual experience does one come to know that one is enjoying a genuine perceptual experience and so has the conclusive reason that one has?

In response to this question, a disjunctivist might say that a subject knows that her perceptual state is a genuine one through the perceptual state itself.[9] A genuine perceptual experience not only presents a subject with some environmental object, it also *presents or reveals itself* as presenting her with that environmental object—that is, it presents itself as a genuine perceptual experience. If, for instance, I see a red sphere then my perpetual state not only presents to me a red sphere but it also presents itself to me as being a seeing of a red sphere. And if it presents or reveals itself to me as being a seeing of a red sphere, that guarantees that it is one.[10] My perceptual state can thus serve as a conclusive ground for my belief that I see a red sphere, and so enable that belief to count as an item of knowledge. And we can assert this even while acknowledging that a genuine perceptual experience is introspectively indistinguishable from a corresponding hallucinatory experience. In the hallucinatory case a subject's experience does not reveal itself as presenting her with some environmental object, since it is compatible with her being in that state that there is no such object; rather, it merely *appears* to do so.[11] Therefore, if a subject is unaware that she is hallucinating a red sphere and forms the belief that she sees a red sphere, then her belief will fail to qualify as knowledge.

The implication of this account is that subjects cannot infallibly determine what their reflectively accessible reasons are. Since for every genuine perceptual experience there exists a corresponding bad introspectively indistinguishable experiential state, it is possible for a subject to mistakenly believe (perhaps through no fault of her own) that an experience of hers provides her with a reflectively accessible conclusive reason to believe that p when it does not, or for a subject to mistakenly believe (again, possibly through no fault on her part) that an experience of hers does not provide her with a reflectively accessible conclusive reason to believe that p when in fact it does.

An example of the first sort of case would be one in which a subject is unknowingly the victim of an hallucination. To illustrate the second sort of case, suppose that Alice has been told by someone she knows to be a reliable informant that she is currently

[8] For more comprehensive discussions of disjunctivism, see the sources cited in note 4.

[9] This account is consistent with that of McDowell (2011), as I understand it (see especially pp. 39–42).

[10] This is parallel to the claim that if my perceptual state presents to me a red sphere in front of me, then there is a red sphere in front of me.

[11] I think this is true even of subjects who know they are hallucinating. Even when one knows that some aspect of one's experience is hallucinatory, it still seems phenomenologically correct to say that one's experiential state appears to present that aspect as a feature of one's environment.

hallucinating a red sphere, and as a result believes that she is hallucinating a red sphere. As it turns out, the informant is mistaken and Alice is actually enjoying a genuine perceptual experience of a red sphere. According to disjunctivism, Alice is in possession of a reflectively accessible conclusive reason to believe that there is a red sphere in front of her yet she mistakenly believes that she is not.

Cases similar to Alice's also seem to show that certain features of a subject's cognitive situation can affect whether that subject can take advantage of the opportunity for knowledge that her genuine perceptual experiences afford. For instance, suppose that Bob has been told by someone he regards as a reliable informant that he is hallucinating a red sphere in front of him and that, as it happens, the informant is mistaken. If Bob were to form the belief that there is a red sphere in front of him nonetheless, then it seems his belief would not amount to a case of knowledge. Even though Bob's experience is presenting him with a red sphere located in front of him, the fact that he also has a good reason to doubt it is means that it would not be reasonable for him to believe that it is. It would therefore not be reasonable for him to believe that there is a red sphere in front of him on the ground that he sees a red sphere in front of him. And this intuitively would prevent that belief from counting as an instance of knowledge if Bob were to form it on that ground.[12] However, the fact that certain circumstances can prevent a subject from taking advantage of the opportunity for knowledge that genuine perceptual experiences afford does not impugn the central claims of epistemological disjunctivism. Nor should it obscure the contention that when where there are no such impediments, subjects can acquire perceptual knowledge of their environment by forming appropriate beliefs on the basis of the reflectively accessible conclusive reasons provided by their genuine perceptual experiences.

Before concluding this section, I want to briefly compare disjunctivism with dogmatism, another theory in the epistemology of perception that has lately been receiving a lot of attention.[13] Understanding the differences between them will be important for the discussion of the first version of the problem of easy knowledge in Sect. 3.

Dogmatists hold that genuine perceptual experiences provide subjects with reflectively accessible defeasible (non-conclusive) reasons to believe appropriate propositions about aspects of their environment. According to them, for some range of properties, rational support for the belief that x is F is provided by the perceptual experience of x's looking or appearing to be F.[14] If certain other conditions are met (e.g., the rational support is not defeated and the subject's belief is not Gettierized) then the subject is also in a position to know that x is F on the basis of the perceptual experience.

Both disjunctivism and dogmatism are neo-Moorean epistemological theories. That is, they both assert that it's possible for a subject to know facts about her environment

[12] Pritchard claims that it's also possible for there to be considerations that the subject is not actually aware of (say, because of negligence) but that she ought to be aware of that prevent her from acquiring knowledge on the basis of a genuine perceptual experience (2012, p. 30).

[13] The term dogmatism is Pryor's (2000). Pollock puts forward a similar theory under the label "direct realism" (1974).

[14] Again, color properties are a plausible candidate for inclusion in a set of perceptible properties of objects, and I'll be focusing on an example involving them in Sect. 3.

on the basis of her perceptual experience, which in turn allows her to infer the falsity of radical skeptical hypotheses, such as the hypothesis that she is a brain in a vat. Both theories also allow for basic knowledge, in both of the senses I distinguished in Sect. 1. According to each of them, subjects can sometimes know facts on the basis of grounds furnished by their perceptual experiences; it is not required that they have additional knowledge either that the ground on the basis of which they know is reliable or that their faculty of perception is reliable.

The key difference between disjunctivism and dogmatism lies in how they understand the nature of the reasons for belief provided by perceptual experiences. In particular, dogmatists accept, while disjunctivists reject, the highest common factor thesis. The fact that dogmatists accept this thesis means that on their theory even in the case of genuine perceptual experience the reflectively accessible rational support that a subject has in virtue of her experience to believe, say, that a sphere is red is that it appears red to her, which constitutes a reason to believe that the sphere is red that is less than conclusive. Disjunctivists disagree on this score, since they believe that in cases of genuine perceptual experience one's experience provides one with conclusive reasons to believe appropriate propositions about her environment.

3 Easy knowledge: closure

If a theory allows for ground-basic perceptual knowledge, it implies we are sometimes able to acquire knowledge that certain skeptical hypotheses are not true. Assuming that conditions are right, a subject can know that things are thus and so on the basis of reasons provided by her perceptual experience, and she can then infer that conditions that are incompatible with things being thus and so do not obtain by reasoning according to the following schema:

(1) Things are thus and so.
(2) If things are thus and so, then it is not the case that H (where H is a proposition incompatible with things being thus and so).
(3) It is not the case that H.

At least, subjects can know instances of (3) if the following closure principle is true:[15]

> Closure: If S knows that p, and S competently deduces q from p without losing knowledge that p, then S knows that q.

Neither disjunctivists nor dogmatists are liable to find this generally objectionable. After all, it is part of their neo-Moorean outlook that we have the ability to know that radical skepticism is false in just such a manner. But Cohen believes that theories that allow for ground-basic knowledge also allow subjects to rule out more mundane skeptical hypotheses using the same pattern of reasoning in a way he finds problematic (2002, p. 313). To illustrate, Cohen puts forward a case in which a father and son are shopping for a red table. At the store the father points to a certain table and says he'll buy it because it's red. The son, having "inherited his father's obsessive personality,"

[15] This formulation is due to Hawthorne (2004).

worries that the table might actually be white with red lights shining on it, to which the father replies by rehearsing the following reasoning:

(4) The table is red.
(5) If the table is red, then it is not white with red lights shining on it.
(6) So, the table is not white with red lights shining on it.

The father believes (4) on the basis of his perceptual experience, and we may suppose that all the conditions are as they need to be for him to know that (4) on this basis (e.g., the lighting in the store is normal and there is no good reason for him or his son to suspect that it is abnormal) and that he is capable of making competent deductions. Yet, Cohen points out, the father's response to his son's worries is somehow unsatisfactory.

The unsatisfactory nature of the father's reply to his son requires an explanation. Cohen thinks that the explanation is that the father cannot know (6) on the basis of this reasoning. And since Closure is extremely plausible, he thinks the explanation of this fact is that the father cannot know (4) simply on the basis of his perceptual experience. Finally, he cannot know (4) in this way because in order for him to know (4) he needs to know that his perceptual experience is a reliable ground for believing that the table is red. Thus Cohen takes the case to show that theories that allow for ground-basic knowledge are incorrect.

If Cohen's argument is to succeed it must be the case that denying the father can know (6) is the only plausible way to explain why the father's response is unsatisfactory. But this latter claim is open to dispute, for there is another possible explanation available. This is that the argument is dialectically ineffective against the son's concerns.[16]

Dialectical effectiveness is the capacity of an argument to overcome (perhaps unjustified) doubts had by an interlocutor. And an argument may allow one to come to know its conclusion even if it will not be dialectically effective relative to a certain audience. For example, you may come to know a mathematical theorem T by reasoning through a sound proof for T that begins from premises you know to be true, and yet there may be no way to convince me of the truth of T using this argument. Suppose, for instance, that I have irrational doubts about the truth of one of the premises (perhaps it conflicts with a dogma of my Pythagorean cult), so that when offered the proof I instead strengthen my doubts about that premise. But the proof's lack of dialectical effectiveness against me would not show that you are unable to use it to acquire knowledge of T.

In a similar way, it is open to the basic knowledge theorist to respond that the father's argument is unsatisfactory because it is dialectically ineffective against his son's doubts. Since the son is concerned that the lighting may be unsuitable for telling the colors of things by looking at them, appealing to their shared perceptual experience will not overcome his doubts. The son is concerned that he is not enjoying a genuine perceptual experience revealing to him a red table, but is worried that he may be undergoing an indistinguishable experiential state that merely appears to do this. Since the first premise (4) of the father's argument that the table is not white with red lights shining on it is justified by perceptual experience, whose epistemic power is precisely what the son doubts, the argument doesn't provide an independent basis for removing

[16] For versions of this response, see Pryor (2004) and Markie (2005).

those doubts. Anyone whose doubts about the world are sustained by doubts about the credentials of their experience is not going to be moved to give up their doubts by arguments that appeal to experience!

Although the son refuses to believe that the table in front of him is red, according to the disjunctivist he is in a good position to acquire knowledge of its color on the basis of his perceptual experience. The parameters of the case are such that the son's experience does in fact provide him with a reflectively accessible reason to believe that the table is red, even though he does not acknowledge this fact about it because of his concerns about the lighting. And since, we have supposed, the son lacks any good but misleading reason for mistrusting the deliverances of his senses, the son no less than the father can exploit this opportunity to know the table's color. The difference between father and son is that the latter harbors unjustified doubts—they have been specified as being due to nothing more than "an obsessive personality"—that psychologically prevent him from taking advantage of the opportunity for knowledge his experience affords him.

We therefore have an alternative explanation of why there would be something unsatisfying about the father's replying to the son's concerns using the argument that moves from (4) to (6). The explanation is that the argument is dialectically ineffective against those concerns. (Given that the son's doubts are unjustified, the most effective move on the father's part dialectically speaking would probably be to remind him he lacks any good reason for holding them.) But the fact that the father's argument is not an effective dialectical instrument in this context is compatible with the father's knowing (6) on its basis.[17]

Cohen considers this alternative explanation, but he rejects the claim that the father's reasoning is unsatisfactory only because it is dialectically ineffective. He points out, quite rightly, that "even if anti-skeptical reasoning is dialectically ineffective against a skeptic, if it is to have any anti-skeptical force *for us*, it must strike *us* as good reasoning" (2005, p. 419). But he believes that the father's reasoning should not strike us as being good. And if this is correct, then there is more wrong with the father's reasoning than its dialectical ineffectiveness against his son's doubts.

The conception of perceptual experience that Cohen works with is similar to that of the dogmatist. And I agree that we have good reason to be suspicious of the father's claim to know (6) *on the dogmatist's conception of perceptual experience*. In order to see why, consider the following principle of evidential transmission (Pritchard 2012, p. 75):

[17] Pritchard claims that when a subject explicitly claims to know that p in response to a challenge that raises a specific error-possibility, she generates the conversational implicature that she can perceptually discriminate between it's being the case that p and the scenario asserted in the error-possibility (2012, pp. 143–146). Therefore, on his view it would be conversationally inappropriate for the father to explicitly claim he knows that the table is red, even though it is true that he knows this. So far this does not speak to Cohen's case, since the father does not explicitly assert "I know the table is red." But if one were to add that it is conversationally appropriate to use a certain premise in responding to a skeptical challenge only if it would be conversationally appropriate to explicitly claim to know the truth of that premise, then one could derive the conclusion that when the father asserts (4) in response to his son's challenge he makes an assertion that is conversationally inappropriate. While this conclusion is not incompatible with my view, I do not rely on any assumptions about what is conversationally appropriate.

> Transmission: If S knows that p in virtue of set of evidence E, and S competently deduces q from p without losing knowledge that p, then S knows that q, where that knowledge is sufficiently supported by E.

Like Closure, Transmission is intuitively plausible. For instance, suppose I know there will be a thunderstorm tomorrow in virtue of meteorological evidence M, and I competently deduce that it will not be sunny all day tomorrow and in doing so come to know that it will not be sunny all day tomorrow. Then, it seems that M must also be a sufficient basis for my knowledge that it will not be sunny all day tomorrow.

Now consider the following case: I claim to know that Peter stole the cookies on the ground that I saw someone who looks like Peter take them from the kitchen; I infer that Paul did not steal the cookies and I decide to make him a consolation desert. But Becky objects that I'm acting too quickly, for the lights were off and in the dark Paul looks just like Peter. Becky's objection seems cogent, for if I know that Peter stole the cookies on the basis of my visual evidence and I deduce that Paul didn't steal them, then I ought to know that Paul didn't steal the cookies, and my visual evidence ought to be a sufficient ground for this knowledge. But Becky correctly points out that the quality of my visual evidence isn't good enough to support knowledge that Paul didn't steal the cookies (for all I know, it easily could have been him who took them), and that I therefore do not know that Peter, rather than Paul, is the culprit.

The problem for dogmatism is that the father's reasoning in Cohen's case seems analogous. That is, if the father really does know that the table is red on the basis that it appears red, and he competently deduces from this that the table is not white with red lights shining on it, then he ought to know that the table is not white with red lights shining on it, where the fact that the table appears red is sufficient evidence for this knowledge. But it doesn't seem plausible that the table's appearing to be red is, all on its own, a sufficient evidential basis to support knowledge that the table isn't white with red lights shining on it. In order to know that the table is not white with red lights shining on it, the father would need some evidence that tended sufficiently to rule this possibility out, but the mere appearance of the table as red does not do this—after all, that's exactly how we'd expect a white table with red lights shining on it to appear! Therefore, if we assume the dogmatist's conception of perceptual experience, then it seems that Cohen is right that the father's reasoning ought to strike us as bad reasoning. We should find this reasoning unsatisfactory, because the quality of the father's perceptual evidence is not good enough to support knowledge of (4) and (6).

The options for the dogmatist at this point are either (i) to deny Transmission or (ii) assert that, contrary to intuition, a table's appearing red is sufficient to ground knowledge that the table isn't white with red lights shining on it. Neither of these options is very appealing, and it is therefore a significant advantage for disjunctivism that Transmission does not make trouble for it, as Pritchard points out.[18] If disjunctivism is true,

[18] Pritchard makes the point in relation to Dretske's zebra case (2012, p. 98). If a subject knows that a certain animal is a zebra in virtue of seeing that it is a zebra, and deduces that the animal is not a cleverly disguised mule, then the subject knows it is not a mule in virtue of seeing it is a zebra. Seeing that the an animal is a zebra is sufficient evidence for knowledge that it isn't a cleverly disguised mule because it excludes this possibility, and so Transmission is not violated.

then when the father looks at the table he enjoys a genuine perceptual experience of it. Since the father's perceptual state is a genuine perceptual experience, he has evidence that the table is red that is both reflectively accessible and conclusive, evidence he could express by saying that he *sees* a red table. And there is no question that if the father has this evidence, then it is also sufficient evidence to support knowledge that the table is not white with red lights shining on it. For if the father's evidence consists in seeing that the table is red it rules out the possibility that the table is white with red lights shining on it.

Many epistemologists will no doubt balk at the contention that the father's perceptual evidence guarantees that the table is red, and so conclusively rules out the possibility that it is white with red lights shining on it. Whatever the father's perceptual evidence is, they will say, it is the same as the evidence he would have if he were hallucinating a red table, and in a hallucinatory case the evidence he possesses wouldn't guarantee that the table is red. However, this objection uses as a premise something the disjunctivist denies, namely, the claim that the evidence that the father actually possesses is the same as the evidence he would possess if he were hallucinating. The disjunctivist contends that the father has a reflectively accessible conclusive reason to believe that the table is red that he would lack if he were hallucinating a red table. And this reason constitutes evidence for the belief that the table is not white with red lights shining on it that the father would lack if he were hallucinating.[19]

Let me step back and summarize the argument of this section. Cohen points out that the father's reasoning from (4) to (6) is somehow unsatisfactory. To this, the basic knowledge theorist can contend that the unsatisfactory nature of the father's reasoning is due to the fact that it is dialectically ineffective against his son's concerns. However, the disjunctivist is in a better position than the dogmatist to make this response convincingly. Cohen's complaint that the father's reasoning should not strike *us* as good seems right if we adopt the dogmatist's theory of perception, since the dogmatist's claim that the father can know (4) and (6) is problematic in light of Transmission. But if we adopt disjunctivism then the father's reasoning *should* strike us as good reasoning. For on the disjunctivist's view the father knows (4) on the basis of a perceptual experience that provides him with a conclusive reason to believe it, and his reasoning from (4) to (6) is impeccable. His reasoning is thus good in the sense that it constitutes a valid inference from known premises.

[19] Notice that it is a priori knowable that if one sees (or otherwise perceives) something as F, then it is F. This is significant since it enables us to accept ground-basic knowledge while still understanding why it might look plausible that in order to know some proposition one must first know that the ground on the basis of which one knows it is reliable. The intuitive support for this principle is the thought that in order for it to be rational for a subject to base her belief that p on a certain ground she must not be "in the dark" as to whether that ground reliably indicates that p. But the disjunctivist can say that there is a sense in which a subject can have ground-basic knowledge that p without being completely in the dark about whether her ground reliably indicates that p. Since it is an a priori truth that perceiving something as F entails that it is F, a subject who bases her belief that x is F on the reason provided by a genuine perceptual state of it as F will be in a position to know, by reflection alone, that the ground of her belief is a perfectly reliable indicator of its truth. The fact that she is in a position to know this by reflection alone provides a sense in which it isn't simply an accident from her perspective that her ground is reliable. But the fact that she is able to know by reflection alone that the ground for her belief that p is reliable does not entail that she is required to actually *form* the belief that it is in order for her to know that p.

4 Easy knowledge: bootstrapping

Even if the disjunctivist has a good response to the version of the problem of easy knowledge involving closure, there is a second version of the problem to consider: the "bootstrapping" problem. Bootstrapping occurs when a subject attempts to use a certain source to gain evidence for the reliability of that very source. Vogel (2000, 2008) and Fumerton (1995) raise bootstrapping as an objection to reliabilism, though Cohen (2002) thinks it applies to any theory that allows for basic knowledge.

In objecting to reliabilism Vogel presents the case of Roxanne, who drives a car with a reliable gas gauge. Roxanne has no information about the reliability of the gauge but implicitly trusts it nonetheless, automatically forming beliefs about the level of gas in her car's tank by consulting it. Roxanne forms beliefs about the level of gas in the tank in this manner on a number of occasions, and she also notes the reading on the gas gauge on each occasion. She then concludes that the gauge is reliable on the basis of the following reasoning:

Gas Gauge

(1) At t_1 the gauge reads "F".
(2) At t_1 the tank is full.
(3) At t_1 the gauge reads "F" and the tank is full.
(4) At t_2 the gauge reads "E".
(5) At t_2 the tank is empty.
(6) At t_2 the gauge reads "E" and the tank is empty.
(7) At t_3 the gauge reads "1/2".
(8) At t_3 the tank is half-full.
(9) At t_3 the gauge reads "1/2" and the tank is half-full.
…etc.
(10) On each occasion the gauge read accurately.
(11) The gauge is reliable.

It's absurd that Roxanne could move from ignorance that her gas gauge is reliable to knowledge, or even justified belief, that it is on the basis of Gas Gauge. Yet reliabilism appears to be committed to saying that she can since, we may suppose, every step of her reasoning is underwritten by a reliable belief-producing process.

Vogel argues that internalists have a plausible diagnosis as to why Roxanne cannot know or justifiedly believe (11). The reason is that, by stipulation, she has no evidence that pertains to the question of whether her gas gauge is reliable. But, according to internalism (as Vogel understands it) knowledge requires justification and justification requires evidence, at least in cases like Roxanne's (2008, p. 520).

Interestingly, Cohen believes that all basic knowledge theories that allow for basic knowledge license objectionable bootstrapping.[20] Suppose Zara attempts to hold a justified belief in the reliability of her color vision simply as the result of viewing a succession of colored cards and engaging in the following reasoning:

[20] Weisberg (2010) argues that the bootstrapping problem spreads even to theories that do not allow for basic knowledge. Cohen disputes this latter charge (2010, pp. 146–148).

Eye test

(12) At t_1 card 1 looks red.
(13) At t_1 card 1 is red.
(14) At t_1 card 1 looks red and card 1 is red.
(15) At t_2 card 2 looks blue.
(16) At t_2 card 2 is blue.
(17) At t_2 card 2 looks blue and card 2 is blue.
(18) At t_3 card 3 looks green.
(19) At t_3 card 3 is green.
(20) At t_3 card 3 looks green and card 3 is green.
…etc.
(21) On each occasion my color vision was accurate.
(22) My color vision is reliable.

Note that the conclusion is ambiguous between the two kinds of knowledge sources that I distinguished in Sect. 1. It might be construed as saying either that my faculty of color vision is reliable or that the grounds that it provides are reliable indicators of the colors of things. I think the first construal is the most natural, and it is the one I'll be working with. Cohen thinks it absurd that Zara could justifiably believe that her color vision is reliable by viewing the succession of cards without any sort of independent check. But if we permit basic knowledge (of grounds and faculties), then it seems we should also allow that Zara can justifiedly believe the conclusion of the argument on its basis. The basic knowledge theorist says that, in favorable circumstances, Zara can know propositions like (13), (16), and (19) on the basis of her color vision, without prior knowledge that her color vision is reliable. (12), (15), and (18) (and similar propositions) are knowable on the basis of introspection, (14) follows from (12) and (13), (17) follows from (15) and (16) and (20) follows from (18) and (19). (21) is logically entailed by the previous propositions and belief in (22) is justified by induction. Cohen concludes that if there is something wrong with this reasoning, the best explanation is that Zara cannot justifiably believe the conclusion on the basis of the argument. And the best explanation of this fact is that she cannot have basic knowledge of propositions like (13), (16), and (19).

There certainly *seems* to be something awry with Zara's reasoning. But it is debatable whether (a) this is due to the fact that Zara cannot justifiedly believe the conclusion on the basis of the argument and (b) if it is due to such a fact whether Cohen has given the correct explanation of it. Some theorists accept (a) but propose an alternative explanation. One common strategy has been to note that Zara's belief in (22) is supposed to be justified by induction. But induction is defeasible, and this leaves open the possibility that some other feature of bootstrapping reasoning gives rise to a defeater.[21] However, it's difficult to understand how the only thing wrong with the argument could be that the inductive inference to the conclusion is defeated. As White points out, if we allow that Zara knows (12)–(20) (and similar propositions) and (21), then it seems

[21] Versions of this strategy are pursued by Vogel (2008), Weisberg (2010), Titelbaum (2010), and Douven and Kelp (2013).

something must account for her run of success (2006, pp. 546–547). And what else could explain it other than her color vision's being reliable?

At any rate, I propose to dispute (a).[22] If we contend that Zara can justifiably believe the argument's conclusion then the challenge is to explain why it appears that there is something unsatisfactory about her reasoning. One explanation is that, like the closure-based reasoning discussed in Sect. 3, Zara's reasoning will not be dialectically effective against a certain sort of skeptic. Suppose, for example, that Mary cannot see the colors of the cards Zara is looking at, but doubts the reliability of Zara's color vision. Then Mary won't believe that Zara is justified in believing (13), (16), (19), and similar propositions, and so she won't believe that Zara has sufficient evidence for (22). Therefore, Zara would not be able to remove Mary's doubts about the reliability of Zara's color vision by walking her through the reasoning in Eye Test. But all this is compatible with Zara's knowing (13), (16), (19) and thus justifiably believing (22) on the basis of that reasoning. So long as she genuinely perceives the colors of the cards, and lacks good reason to question the credentials of her experience, then on the disjunctivist's view Zara can know propositions about the colors of the cards she perceives.

Still, the lack of dialectical effectiveness is not enough to remove the appearance that something is wrong with Zara's reasoning. I think the remaining appearance is due to the fact that her reasoning can easily seem to be analogous to Roxanne's reasoning in Gas Gauge. But Roxanne's reasoning, I have agreed, really is absurd and its absurdity cannot simply be chalked up to its dialectical ineffectiveness. After all, neither Roxanne nor anyone else in the scenario has doubts about the reliability of her gas gauge.[23] The challenge for anyone who accepts the legitimacy of Eye Test, then, is to show how that case can be distinguished in a principled way from Gas Gauge.

I think that the disjunctivist can provide such a principled distinction that explains why Zara is in an epistemically stronger position than Roxanne, at least from an internalist perspective. Roxanne forms beliefs about the level of gas in her tank on the basis of the readings on her gas gauge, but she has no information about whether the reading on the gauge is a reliable ground for a corresponding belief about the level of gas in the tank. Moreover, she is also unable to become aware, simply by reflecting on the ground, that it is a reliable ground for the corresponding belief. Rather, in order to become aware that the reading on the gauge is a reliable ground for a corresponding belief about the level of gas in her tank, Roxanne would have to engage in additional empirical inquiry, such as checking the reading on the gauge against the measurement of a dipstick she knows to be reliable.

By contrast, if disjunctivism is true then Zara is able to become aware, simply by reflection, that her perceptual state is a reliable ground for a corresponding belief about

[22] Therefore, I am in agreement with Van Cleve (2003), Bergmann (2004, 2006), and Markie (2005), who all hold the view that bootstrapping can sometimes lead to justified belief or knowledge.

[23] This vitiates Bergmann's response to the bootstrapping problem. Bergmann contends that bootstrapping reasoning is only bad when the subject is in a questioning/doubting situation, that is, a situation in which, prior to forming a belief in the conclusion, she is or should be questioning the reliability of the source at issue (2006, p. 198). Roxanne is not in a questioning/doubting situation, however, and yet her reasoning is still bad.

the color of the card she is looking at. Suppose that Zara believes that a certain card that she is looking at is red for the reason that she sees a red card-shaped object before her. That she sees a red card-shaped object before her guarantees the truth of her belief that the card is red, so her perceptual state is a reliable ground for the belief. Moreover, Zara can become aware on the basis of reflection alone that the fact she can report by saying "I see a red card" guarantees the truth of the belief that the card is red. The reason is that, insofar as seeing is a factive state it is knowable a priori that if one sees that something is F, then it is F.

Therefore, according to the disjunctivist there is a difference between Roxanne's case and Zara's, namely, while Roxanne is not able to become aware simply by reflection that the readings on her gas gauge are reliable grounds for corresponding beliefs about the level of gas in her tank, Zara is able to become aware simply by reflection that her perceptual states are reliable grounds for corresponding beliefs about the colors of the cards. And this difference is an epistemically significant one on an internalist theory of justification. Internalists typically hold that for a belief to be justified, it must not be an accident from the subject's own point of view that the belief is true (cf. BonJour 1985). Roxanne's beliefs about the level of gas in her tank would not be justified by internalist lights, since even if the gauge is in fact reliable Roxanne has no evidence that it is. By contrast, inasmuch as Zara can know simply by reflection that her perceptual states are reliable grounds for her beliefs about the colors of the cards, there is reason to say that from Zara's own perspective it is no accident that those beliefs are true.

It might be objected that Zara cannot become aware merely through reflection that the perceptual state she is in when she looks at a red card guarantees it to be the case that there is a red card before her. For even if Zara is enjoying a genuine perceptual experience of a red card, that state is nonetheless introspectively indistinguishable from the state she would be in if she were merely hallucinating a red card. Therefore, Zara doesn't have reflective access to the fact that she's seeing a red card, as opposed to merely hallucinating one. And if she doesn't have reflective access to the fact that she sees a red card, then she cannot come to know by reflection alone that the perceptual state she is in guarantees it that there is a red card before her.

Tempting as this argument may be, it should be obvious that it assumes something the disjunctivist denies, namely, the highest common factor thesis. Assuming this thesis is necessary to validly move from the premise that Zara's perceptual experience is introspectively indistinguishable from a possible hallucinatory state to the conclusion that Zara does not have reflective access to the fact that she sees a red card. The objection therefore begs the question against epistemological disjunctivism.

In summary, I have rejected the idea that the appearance of there being something unsatisfactory about Zara's reasoning is to be explained by the fact that it cannot justify her belief in its conclusion. I noted that one alternative explanation is that her reasoning is not dialectically effective against a skeptic. Though I agree, this response is not enough to remove the appearance in question. This is because another source of it is that Zara's reasoning about her color vision can easily seem analogous to Roxanne's reasoning about her gas gauge. But I have argued that there is an important difference between the two cases.

On the disjunctivist view I have put forward, Zara can hold the justified belief that her faculty of color vision is reliable on the basis of data provided by that very faculty, so long as she is in favorable circumstances (e.g., the lighting is not abnormal and she has no reason to believe it is abnormal). Insofar as she enjoys a genuine perceptual experience of a card of color F before her, she has a reflectively accessible conclusive reason to believe that there is a card of color F before her. And the knowledge she acquires by perception can form the basis for an inductive-explanatory argument that her faculty of color vision is reliable. This is not a trivial conclusion. For even if perceiving is factive, it doesn't follow from the mere fact that someone perceives something, in a certain sensory modality and on a certain occasion, that she possesses a perceptual faculty that is generally reliable.

I don't think we should shun this conclusion. It is a virtue of a basic knowledge theory that it allows us to use our epistemic faculties to come to know that those faculties are reliable. Scientific enquiries into our perceptual faculties can provide us with information about the details as to how those faculties reliably give rise to true beliefs. But it would be unduly skeptical to disallow the possibility of justification for beliefs about the reliability of its perceptual powers to a pre-scientific consciousness. And it seems the only route available to such justification for this sort of subject would be through knowing that its perceptual powers typically help give rise to true beliefs about the perceptible properties of medium-sized physical objects, which knowledge is itself acquired in part through exercises of those same perceptual powers.

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