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EVIDENCE, SKEPTICISM, AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY

ABSTRACT: This paper responds to Jody Azzouni's article 'Use and mention with respect to "know", "believe", "evidence", "justification", "hypothesis", and so on: A hot mess' (2025). Azzouni criticizes several aspects of my book *How to Take Skepticism Seriously* (Oxford University Press, 2024), especially my discussion of evidence. This paper addresses Azzouni's comments regarding evidence, justification, and skepticism. It closes with an extended discussion of methodological issues.

1. INTRODUCTION

Jody Azzouni's paper addresses a set of interrelated questions about the nature of the objects of belief, knowledge, and justification; about the relation between justification and knowledge; about the relation between evidence and justification; and more. The main concern is with often-unnoticed shifts that can take place in what we are talking about in epistemology, typified by unnoticed shifts between talking about propositions and about the matters those propositions are about.

Azzouni is surely right that we epistemologists can get tangled up in issues of this sort. He is also correct that we often write in ways that gloss over these details. For instance, it is standard in epistemology for people to write things like this:

S knows that P only if P is true.

This is convenient shorthand, but as Azzouni notes we cannot substitute the same thing for both instances of “P” and get something that is grammatical (2025, 29–30). On Azzouni’s account, such formulations in epistemology both obscure and express an important error that only gets cleared up when we reflect on what is going on in knowledge attributions, *that*-clauses, and the like: knowing is a relation between a person and a “worldly conglomeration of objects and relations” (2025, 26–30, 38), whereas what is true is a proposition (which Azzouni understands as an interpreted sentence), so that it is a mistake to identify knowledge with a relation to a true proposition.

The crucial question is whether and why such details matter on a particular occasion. They will obviously matter if one is interested in questions such as “Is knowledge a relation to a worldly conglomeration of objects and relations, or to a true proposition?” or “Does evidence comprise worldly conglomerations of objects and relations, or rather true propositions?” However, Azzouni claims that “these errors have led to and motivated a number of false but influential conclusions in epistemology,” (2025, 3). Since he devotes a significant amount of critical attention to my recent book *How to Take Skepticism Seriously* (Leite 2024), I want to look in detail at the aspects of my discussion that concern him. As I will bring out, the complications he addresses don’t in fact impact the fundamental points that I make.

I will begin with a small example; we will soon get to bigger fish. In Chapter 5 of my book, I am concerned with a broad question: What, if anything, might be wrong with responding to Cartesian-style arguments for external world skepticism by appealing to things we know about the world? For instance, what, if anything, would be wrong with rejecting Descartes’ Evil Demon hypothesis by simply pointing out that I’m surely not being deceived by an evil demon, since there aren’t any demons? The chapter addresses various suggestions from contemporary epistemology, and it accordingly ranges over a variety of epistemic categories and proposals about their requirements (knowledge, justification, good reasons, evidence, and more). Sometimes I make points in shorthand ways. For instance, I consider the suggestion that Nozick’s Sensitivity Condition reveals that there is something wrong with responding to these skeptical arguments in the way that I propose. I point out (follow-

ing Sosa and Williamson) that Nozick's Sensitivity Condition is incorrect when it comes to knowledge: we don't have to satisfy it in order to know something. I then quickly comment (in two sentences) that analogous conditions are incorrect when it comes to reasonable and justified belief, to having good or adequate reason to believe, and to having excellent evidence in favor of a belief (Leite 2024, 106).

Azzouni complains that here “‘justified’, ‘reasonable’, and ‘having excellent evidence’ are all being presumed to largely come to the same thing” (2025, 12). But I don't make any such presumption. I recognize that what I wrote contained a misleading “thus”, but my point was that for each of these epistemic notions, relevant variants of Nozick's Sensitivity Condition are incorrect.

I could have spent several pages making this point by going through examples for each such notion. For instance, I could have considered requirements like this one:

You can't have excellent evidence for your belief that *p*, unless you wouldn't believe that *p* (by the same method) if *p* were false.¹

And I could have gone through examples that show that this condition and its relatives are incorrect. However, I judged that doing so would have been a waste of time and pages, so I offered two synoptic summary sentences instead. I trusted that my readers could construct relevant examples on their own, if they wanted to.

In philosophical writing it is sometimes useful to summarize what one takes to be obvious. It is sometimes useful to gloss over irrelevant points of detail. It is sometimes useful to lump different things together, if the differences between them aren't pertinent to the issues under discussion. One might even use the terms for them interchangeably. These and other convenient shorthands don't always involve errors that matter, though they can sometimes lead to misunderstandings. This is something that both writers and readers must be attentive to.

I turn now to some “bigger fish”: evidence, the bearing of evidence and justification on skeptical arguments, and methodological concerns.

2. EVIDENCE

What is it, exactly, that constitutes the evidence when we have good evidence for *thus* and *such*? Framing things in Azzouni's terms, is

it, for instance, (A) propositions, or even true propositions, or rather (B) worldly things, perhaps facts or (if these are different) worldly conglomerations of objects and relations, or what? Azzouni denies the first option. “What evidence *isn’t* is bodies of discourse or propositions” (31, emphasis in the original). He claims that the term “evidence” applies to “something purportedly worldly—more generally it holds of the relata of ‘fact that’ clauses, whatever those are... What ‘evidence’ holds of—facts that...—always obtains” (31, ellipsis in original). And again: “We... identify evidence with the relata of *that*-clauses, subject to a necessary condition: that the propositions corresponding to those *that*-clauses must be true” (32).²

This issue matters if you are trying to do the metaphysics of evidence. But it may be something that we can acceptably gloss over if we have other concerns.

In my book I have two primary issues in mind when talking about evidence. One is the pervasive assumption in discussions of external world skepticism that our evidence is limited to something “internal”—to our sensory experiences (and perhaps other mental states), or propositions about them, or something like that, all characterized in a way that carries no implications about a world outside of our minds. So, a good part of my book is devoted to arguing, against one or another line of thought, that when we confront skeptical arguments our evidence isn’t limited in this way. It includes, as I put it in order to gesture at the relevant alternative, a wide range of considerations about the world.

The second primary issue in my discussion is whether—to put it in rough and ready fashion—something that isn’t the case, or that isn’t true, can constitute evidence in favor of anything. My claim is that it can’t. Suppose you are asked, “What evidence is there that the butler did it?”, and you reply by saying, “Well, there was blood on his clothes.” If there wasn’t blood on his clothes, then you haven’t managed to provide any evidence that he did it. You might quite reasonably be mistaken about the state of his clothes and so quite reasonably *think* that you have provided evidence that he did it, but you are wrong, as we might tell you.

This second issue is important because it generates forms of epistemic asymmetry (Leite 2024, Chapter 7) without endorsing Williamson’s thesis (2000) about the relation between knowledge and evidence. Here’s

why. The first point about evidence highlighted above, in conjunction with this second point, entails that we can have evidence which our evil-demon-deceived-twin lacks, and this is relevant to our epistemic position with regard to whether we are now being deceived by an evil demon.

In my book, I put these points by using the word “considerations”. To take some passages that Azzouni quotes, I write:

It is crucially important here that in ordinary life it is entirely acceptable to appeal to considerations about the world as evidence for or against other claims... (2024, 99).

And:

...the considerations that you appeal to as evidence are true (2024, 127; here I am contrasting your position with that of your evil-demon-deceived twin)

Azzouni objects:

understood literally it sounds as if ‘considerations’ can be evidence (2025, 46).

He claims, moreover, that considerations can’t be true or false and even that “the noun ‘consideration’ doesn’t refer or even purport to refer to anything” (2025, 46). He suggests that:

because ‘consideration’ is a noun, one can mistakenly assume that there are things, considerations, that the attention of the listener is being drawn to, and then we can ask what those things are, propositions or what propositions describe, or worse (as Leite does) just assume they are propositional, and in fact truth vehicles (2025, 48).

I can understand why someone who wants to sort out the metaphysics of these matters might get stuck on my formulations. But what Azzouni says about the term “considerations” strikes me as quite wrong, as I will explain in a moment.

Let’s start with what I was doing in the passages that Azzouni quotes from my book. Again, I wrote:

It is crucially important here that in ordinary life it is entirely acceptable to appeal to considerations about the world as evidence for or against other claims... (2024, 99).

All I meant by this was something that could be put in the following way, if we were talking about a particular case:

If you say to me, “What evidence is there that the butler did it?”, I can correctly reply (it is perfectly epistemically correct for me to reply) by saying something like, “Well, there is blood on his clothes”.

I used the phrase “considerations about the world” merely as a convenient way to make the general version of this point. I wasn’t staking a claim on the metaphysical issue that concerns Azzouni, and my point doesn’t depend on any such claim. It’s not an issue that we need to sort out for my purpose.³

Similarly, when I contrasted your epistemic position with that of your evil-demon-deceived twin by writing, “... the considerations that you appeal to as evidence are true” (2024, 127), I wasn’t addressing Azzouni’s metaphysical question about what evidence is constituted by. I could equally have put the point this way: ‘When you are asked, “What evidence is there that your plants need water?”, and you reply by saying, “It is 95 degrees out and they are wilting and turning brown,” what you say is true. And if it wasn’t true, then you wouldn’t have managed to provide evidence that your plants need water. This is just one example of a general point.’ This bypasses the metaphysical question that Azzouni is focusing on, because regardless of whether or not we take it to show that evidence is constituted by facts (or by something in that family), the point that I was after still stands.

Contrary to Azzouni’s claims, it is perfectly reasonable to use the word “considerations” in the way that I did. Merriam-Webster gives us this definition of “consideration”: “A matter weighed or taken into account when formulating an opinion or plan” (2026). On that definition, the noun “consideration” surely refers or purports to refer to something, contrary to Azzouni’s proposal. This is borne out by usage. Suppose we are asked what fueled a relative’s decision to leave college. We reply, “Even with a full-time job she couldn’t make ends meet, given the skyrocketing cost of rent. And her student-loan debt was mounting

up rapidly. These economic considerations weighed heavily in her decision to leave college and move back home.” Here we are saying that there are some particular things that weighed in her decision, and we are indicating what they are. Our use of the phrase “these economic considerations” refers back to them.

Azzouni likewise misses that it is unexceptionable to use the word “considerations” in relation to evidence. He considers this sentence, declaring it “completely unacceptable”:

*Those considerations are evidence.

I agree that this might seem odd, absent the specification of appropriate circumstances for its utterance. But imagine that you are talking with a student about their paper. They have offered everything and the kitchen sink in support of their thesis; some of it is useful, but some of it goes nowhere. You point this out to them, saying:

These considerations [pointing to certain parts of the paper] are good evidence for your thesis. But that other stuff? Leave it out.

That sounds good to me.

Azzouni likewise declares that considerations aren’t the sort of thing that can be said to be true or false. But again, he doesn’t look carefully enough at particular examples. Consider what might be offered in a speech by the US Secretary of State in defense of going to war against country X. A critical commentator might write:

The Secretary of State offered three considerations in support of the administration’s pre-emptive strikes. Unfortunately, none of them were true.

Again, this sounds just fine to me.

In fact, I can readily imagine the same commentator continuing with the following remark, which relates “considerations,” “evidence,” and “is true”:

In addition, the Secretary of State offered four considerations as evidence that country X was striving to develop dangerous biological and chemical weapons. Unfortunately, none of them were true either.

This, too, sounds just fine to me.

In short, I don't think that ordinary usage leads straight to the views that Azzouni endorses. Fortunately, I don't need to take a stand on the particular issue about evidence for my purposes in the book. Azzouni doesn't show that anything of moment for my arguments depends on getting this particular metaphysical issue exactly right.⁴

3. SKEPTICAL ARGUMENTS

Azzouni argues that if we don't distinguish having evidence from being justified in believing something, then we will go wrong in relation to skeptical arguments: we will fail to see that issues about evidence don't bear on Cartesian skeptical arguments (2025, 56–59). And he charges that in my work “justification is assimilated to evidence”, or at least that I am “tempted” by such an assimilation (2025, 58). I will address the second charge shortly; first, I want to look at what he says about skeptical arguments.⁵

Azzouni considers a case in which the possibility that one is a brain in a vat is “close”, a “genuine possibility.” He maintains that an ordinary, fully-bodied person in such a world has all sorts of evidence that their envatted compatriot would lack, including evidence that they have hands (2025, 58). He notes that if one holds the view that having a true belief for which one has adequate evidence suffices for knowledge, then one would consequently think that this person knows they have hands (58). However, he maintains that such a person in such a world isn't justified in thinking that they have hands, and he thinks that this result has important consequences for how we should understand Cartesian skepticism.

...given the possibility that S might be a brain in a vat, and given that such a possibility is close, we can say (quite naturally) that S isn't justified in thinking they have the evidence they think they have.... The result: S isn't justified in thinking they have hands although they've got plenty of evidence that they've got hands. And so, the sceptic argues, S doesn't know they have hands because they haven't ruled out a nearby possibility. Conclusion: Whether they have adequate evidence or not for what they believe simply

doesn't bear against Cartesian scepticism (58–59, italics in original).

This passage raises a host of complicated questions regarding what it takes to have adequate evidence, the conditions for justification, the relationship between justification and knowledge, and more. There are a lot of questionable assumptions and transitions in play here.⁶ I am going to set all that aside, however, and focus on what I take to be the fundamental issue: whether having adequate evidence for what one believes bears against Cartesian skepticism.

As a first step, note that Cartesian skepticism is supposed to be a view that applies with generality, including to us, now, in our world. However, Azzouni focuses on a problem that arises specifically for a person in a very particular sort of world: one in which the possibility that the person might be a brain in a vat is (in some relevant but unexplained sense) “close”. The person Azzouni imagines may lack knowledge, but that doesn't necessarily show that we, in our world, lack knowledge. The crucial question is whether for us, in our world, considerations about evidence bear on a Cartesian-style skeptical argument that appeals to the brain in a vat hypothesis.

In point of fact, our world is very different from the world of the example, and this matters. We aren't in a world in which there is any reason whatsoever to suspect that we might be brains in vats, because there aren't any brains in vats; technology hasn't developed that far, thank goodness. And given the methodology of my book, these are points which (as I explain in the book) we are in a position to make. I argue that we both have decisive evidence that we are not brains in vats and also recognize that we have this evidence. We recognize (to use Azzouni's terminology) that the brain-in-a-vat hypothesis does not represent a “close” possibility at all. Our epistemic position is thus in fine shape, quite unlike that of the person in Azzouni's example. And our excellent position does bear against Cartesian scepticism. Given the decisive evidence that we recognize we possess, we are in a position in which we are quite right to reject out of hand the hypothesis that we are brains in vats, and so the brain in a vat version of Cartesian skeptical argumentation doesn't get off the ground for us here and now.⁷ Azzouni has not shown that considerations about justification undermine or undercut any of this.

Here's the upshot. If we are interested in developing a general epistemological theory, it may be important to consider how justification and having evidence relate to each other in various circumstances in which the scenarios described by the skeptical hypotheses are "close" or "distant". But Azzouni has not shown that having and recognizing that one has adequate evidence is irrelevant to the truth of Cartesian skepticism.

I also want to note that Azzouni is quite wrong to take me to be tempted to assimilate having adequate evidence and being justified. I agree with some of his examples. A detective might know something that decisively indicates that the butler did it (and in that sense might have adequate evidence that the butler did it), and yet the detective might not recognize the relevance of what they know. In such a case, the detective won't know on this basis that the butler did it, and (to pick up on one familiar use of the term "justified" in the epistemological literature) they aren't yet justified in believing on this basis that the butler did it. Likewise, you can have excellent evidence that something is the case and yet also incorrectly but completely reasonably believe that your evidence is inadequate. In that case, too, there is a sense in which you have adequate evidence, but you wouldn't be justified in believing on the basis of this evidence (in one familiar use of the term "justified"). I am also inclined to think that you can quite reasonably but incorrectly take yourself to have excellent evidence, leading to a case in which you are justified (in one sense of term—at least we will want to acknowledge that there is something good about your state) in believing something on the relevant basis even though you lack adequate evidence for it.⁸

4. MATTERS OF METHODOLOGY

Azzouni devotes the penultimate section of his paper, "Some Methodological Moralizing" (2025, 59–67), to the methodology of my book. From my perspective, however, his comments arise from a failure to fully appreciate what I am up to.

In my book, I attempt to show that we can satisfactorily reject Cartesian-style arguments for external world skepticism without developing or appealing to an epistemological theory. We do this by preceding

from within what I call the “prephilosophical position”. In a moment I will say something about what I mean by this phrase, as well as by “epistemological theorizing”. First, I want to describe the problem I mean to be addressing.

Cartesian-style skeptical arguments aren’t just a linguistic or conceptual puzzle. They purport to raise a problem about our epistemic access to an objective external world by challenging our ability to have reason to believe anything about such a world. In this way they connect with profound existential concerns and fantasies. They cut to the heart of our sense of our place in the universe. Moreover, they purport to do this “from within”, by making use of principles, procedures, and requirements to which we are all committed as part of the conduct of ordinary epistemic life. In this way they purport to present a problem that is readily available to any thoughtful person. One can easily feel that a distinctive kind of theoretical endeavor is needed in response: that we need to explain what human knowledge is and how it is possible for creatures like us. And that project seems to require developing a general, systematic, explanatory theory of knowledge, justification, evidence, and the like as part of an account of how we can have epistemic access to an objective world at all.

My overall question is whether the principles, procedures, and requirements of ordinary epistemic life really raise any such problem. To test this, I proceed from within the position of ordinary epistemic life. That is, I speak from within the position that supposedly gives rise to a deep problem about our epistemic access to an objective external world, and I ask whether it really does so. In the first instance, I don’t talk about that position so much as from within it, articulating various things that I am committed to in the conduct of ordinary epistemic life. From that position, I address the proposals that might appear to give rise to such a problem. I argue that none of them get off the ground.

Here’s how this goes, in more detail. We start—as in ordinary life—with all of our ordinary commitments about what is the case and what we know, what we have reasons to believe or to doubt, how it is correct to go about evaluating what people know, how it is correct to go about offering or critiquing reasons for belief, and the like. From within this position, we confront the very early stages of Cartesian skeptical argumentation, asking how they are supposed to so much as get going.

We consider various arguments that propose that we might just be a brain in a vat, the victim of a deceiving evil demon, or having a lifelike dream, and we note that given what we know to be true of the world, none of these scenarios are in fact the case. For instance, we aren't being deceived by an evil demon, since there are no demons. We then consider the many and various moves that might be made to attempt to show that there is something wrong with this sort of response: in particular, that it is precluded by requirements and principles to which we are committed in ordinary epistemic life. What we find in each case is that these moves involve elements that we are not in fact committed to and that clash with our clear commitments. Central in all of this are our responses to examples. Here we are mostly not inferring something about (for instance) the necessary conditions of knowledge from data about what people say, but rather declaring (by considering how we are willing to proceed and speaking from within our going view) whether such and such is, or isn't, a piece of knowledge, is or isn't evidence that we have, and the like. We are thereby articulating the requirements, principles, and the like to which we are committed, voicing them in the material mode. In this way we find, over the course of many chapters, that there is no good reason not to rest content with the simple response to the Cartesian skeptical scenarios noted above. At the end of the day, then, we conclude—speaking from within the position of ordinary epistemic life—that Cartesian skepticism is false. I argue that this is a fully satisfactory response: the problem is thereby resolved.

Consider, now, how this result was reached. We did it without developing or appealing to a general, systematic, and explanatory epistemological theory. Instead, we did it, more or less, by voicing our clear commitments about cases, reflecting upon what they do (and don't) involve, and bringing all of this to bear on the various proposals that might seem to favor the skeptic. I consequently argue in the book that we can satisfactorily reject Cartesian-style external world skepticism without developing or appealing to an epistemological theory.

In the book I note (in a passage that Azzouni quotes) that my procedure will involve various forms of reflection upon the ground-level verdicts that emerge. I write:

We will carefully scrutinize skeptical arguments to see what requirements they impose, and we will consider whether

those requirements are among the commitments of ordinary life and science. To do this we might do such things as articulate epistemic claims and principles to which we are committed in ordinary life and science, reflectively describe those commitments and what they involve, reflectively describe aspects of our ordinary epistemic practices, utilize clear examples to show that particular requirements or principles are not correct, draw certain kinds of generalizations from such examples, put two and two together to reach a more general description, summarize the results of all this, and the like (Leite 2024, 10).

Azzouni protests that this sounds like epistemological theorizing. But the fact that epistemological theorizing often involves the sorts of things that I describe here doesn't mean that by engaging in these things I am engaging in epistemological theorizing. (Playing a game of American football involves throwing a football, catching it, running with it, kicking it, tackling each other—but we can do all those things together without thereby playing a game of American football.) Importantly, what I point to with the phrase “epistemological theorizing” involves more than what I describe in the passage Azzouni quotes: it involves particular aspirations that go beyond that description. And it likewise goes beyond what I do in my book: I do the things described in that passage with different aims and in a different spirit.

Here's what I mean. In the paragraphs that immediately follow the one that Azzouni quotes, I describe some of the sorts of aims and activities that are involved in what I label “epistemological theorizing” (2024, 11–12). Most prominently, the sort of theorizing that I have in view is aimed at developing or contributing to the development of a general, systematic, explanatory account of knowledge, evidence, justification, and the like, in order to explain what human knowledge is and how it is possible for creatures like us, to explain what makes our true epistemic evaluations true, to explain our fundamental epistemic relation to the world, or some such.

Different philosophers of course have different aims here and conduct the project in different ways. This is a family of intellectual enterprises; it isn't aptly captured by a definition and certainly not by necessary and sufficient conditions. As paradigms I would include Descartes'

Meditations two through six, Kant's attempt to "remove the scandal to philosophy", Russell's several books in epistemology, and the descendants and relatives of such projects. I would include here, for instance, work as different in other respects as Bonjour's *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (1985), Chisholm's *A Theory of Knowledge* (1989), Davidson's "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge" (2001), and Pryor's "The Skeptic and the Dogmatist" (2000). The crucial point is that what I do in my book is not offered as a contribution to any such enterprise. I'm not trying to develop, offer, or make use of any such theory.⁹

What, then, did I mean by "prephilosophical position"? In ordinary epistemic life we engage in all sorts of epistemic evaluations, say things to the effect that we and others do or don't know various things, offer reasons for our beliefs, ask about or challenge the grounds of other people's beliefs, etc.—all without developing, appealing to, or feeling the need for the sort of theory that I just highlighted. It is in that sense that this is a "prephilosophical" position. Given that this is what I am picking out by the phrase, there is no reason to take it to be something fixed and unchanging, totally transparent, or entirely coherent. My primary claim is just that it does not, here and now (as things are), give rise to a specific kind of fundamental problem about our epistemic relation to an objective external world—and that we can satisfactorily see off this threat without appealing to a particular sort of theorizing.

Azzouni does nothing to show I go wrong in working out this project, since he doesn't directly engage with the arguments of my book. He does not argue, for instance, that commitments of the ordinary epistemic position give rise to insuperable Cartesian skeptical problems. He does not argue that there is a crucial point at which my responses to Cartesian skeptical arguments appeal to something which is not in fact a commitment of ordinary epistemic life. He does not make a case that (despite my aspirations) I in fact develop or lean on a theory of the sort I just highlighted. Nor does he purport to show that in order to satisfactorily refute Cartesian-style skepticism I would have to develop or appeal to such a theory.¹⁰

He does challenge a presupposition of my discussion. The book is framed by the supposition that fallibilism is correct. I am concerned with forms of skepticism that purport to get going even once we have granted fallibilism. Azzouni questions whether fallibilism really is something

that we are committed to in ordinary epistemic life. However, he doesn't keep in view what I mean by "fallibilism". He doesn't directly address whether (as I claim) there can be cases in which we know something even though our evidence is compatible with the falsehood of what we claim to know.

I think there are straightforward examples of this sort, despite the various puzzles that Azzouni highlights. For instance (to repurpose an example from Ernie Sosa), suppose that in perfectly ordinary circumstances I deposit my trash bag into the tenth floor trash chute of my apartment building as I have every week for twenty years. The chute clangs shut, and as usual my trash in fact tumbles away out of sight to the basement. In these circumstances I know that my trash is now somewhere in the bowels of the building, even though it is compatible with all of my evidence that this time, for some extraordinary reason, the bag's fall was blocked at the sixth floor. Azzouni perhaps thinks that trouble is caused for such examples if we agree that we don't know (before the draw) that our ticket in a fair twenty-million ticket lottery is a loser. But whether my trash bag winds up in the basement isn't determined by a lottery. That would be a different situation entirely.

Azzouni's main criticism of my project is to challenge the very idea of a "prephilosophical position". He notes that the place where we begin our inquiry is "a human-created world of language, concepts, methods" that "we grow up in (grow into)" (2025, 60). He stresses that this "human-created world" is dynamic, changing over time, and involves all sorts of "oddities" (61)—various ways in which things don't hang together, appear incoherent or inconsistent, etc., giving rise to conceptual puzzles that invite sophisticated conceptual work (philosophy, in one familiar sense of that term). As he puts it, "what drives us to philosophy is always the same thing: no easy resolution of the complex oddities of our ordinary practices is obvious. That's when philosophy shows up," (61, *italics in the original*).¹¹ And he proposes that two factors conspire to prompt philosophy (so understood). First, our practices and language are not everywhere "transparent". Second, there are "flaws, defects, and infelicities in how we speak and in our practices" (66). He offers several examples, prominently the question of how to fit together our knowledge-talk with our understanding of lotteries and of probability more generally.

Notice that here Azzouni himself is actually committed to the idea of a prephilosophical position analytically distinct from philosophizing: the motivation to engage in the thing he calls philosophy arises in response to features of something (our current practice and judgments) that is already there at that time. That is a prephilosophical position.¹² Its contours at a given point in history may be influenced by prior philosophizing. But what matters is the distinction that shows up at a point in time between, on the one hand, our current ways of proceeding, current commitments about cases, and the like, as they show up in ordinary epistemic life, and, on the other hand, the attempt to develop a certain sort of theory to make sense of it all.

I happily grant to Azzouni that the ordinary, prephilosophical position involves what he calls “oddities”. Some of these give rise to breakdowns that need to be resolved in order for us to go on smoothly functioning in certain arenas. Some call for conceptual engineering. Some call for ethical or political response. Some we live with and get on just fine. Some barely even register with us, if at all.

Right now, many members of a certain intellectual community are particularly interested in questions about how to fit together probabilistic ways of thinking and issues about knowledge. For instance, we find that with certain auxiliary assumptions (e.g., appropriate closure principles) we can raise challenges about our ability to know particular things (such as things about the future) that imply other things that can be conceptualized so as to look analogous to the outcomes of lotteries. It can sometimes seem that arguments in this terrain force us to the conclusion that we aren’t able to know things that we ordinarily, when not thinking about such issues, take ourselves to know. This is what we see in the lottery-based argument sketched by Azzouni (2025, 64).

Here too we have a “prephilosophical” position. To describe some relevant bits of it at the linguistic level: In ordinary epistemic life we appropriately say, taking it to be epistemically unexceptionable, that we know such things as what we will be doing on Thursday morning—we will be at the dentist. We also appropriately say such things as that we don’t know what we will be doing on Thursday afternoon (since we don’t yet know how things will go at the dentist). We grant that we could have a heart attack before Thursday, though if we are in good health we will be baffled and perhaps annoyed by someone who bizarrely raises

that possibility (without having some special reason to think we might have a heart attack) when the topic is whether we know what we will be up to on Thursday morning. We will also contentedly say that we don't know that our lottery ticket will lose, even though we might likewise say (in a different mood, and in a different tone of voice), "Come on, you know it's not going to win." What is our attitude towards all of this in the conduct of ordinary epistemic life? We don't get stuck on any of it, communication goes smoothly, and we don't feel any need for a special account of what is going on.

Insofar as a skeptical argument can arise in this terrain, it is a relatively shallow issue: a conceptual puzzle connected with our use of a certain word in certain contexts given certain auxiliary assumptions. It doesn't raise a general problem about our ability to have knowledge or good reasons for belief about an external world. It leaves perfectly intact that we can have good reasons for belief even in the cases the puzzle applies to. Taking the bird's eye view, then, the problem that appears here is this: it is unclear how, exactly, a particular range of our evaluations of what people know fits together with our judgments about lottery cases and with probabilistic thinking more generally. It isn't even clear whether there is any inconsistency in this portion of the prephilosophical position.

We might want to sort out these issues for the sake of curiosity or conceptual tidiness. What I want to stress, however, is that that isn't demanded within the conduct of ordinary epistemic life. And it certainly isn't part of ordinary epistemic life to think that we need to resolve these issues by developing a general, systematic, explanatory theory of knowledge, justification, evidence, and the like. Of course, people engaged in one or another intellectual discipline will seek one or another sort of understanding of this part of our lives. Someone who is engaged in certain projects in informatics might want an epistemic logic that adequately models and/or straightens out a lot of this. If they develop a logic that straightens things out in one way rather than another, they will have particular goals and auxiliary commitments that will guide how they do so. If they are fond of probabilistic approaches, they will want what they develop to mesh smoothly with probabilistic notions. By contrast, someone who is doing formal semantics will focus primarily on the linguistic data. They will want a particular sort of semantic theory

that covers the data well enough.

So, we have a prephilosophical position here and a question: insofar as that position involves some “oddities” (to use Annouzi’s term), what if anything do we need by way of resolution? If you respond to this situation by seeking a general, systematic, explanatory theory of knowledge, justification, evidence, and the like, that is a step out of the prephilosophical position and into what I call epistemological theorizing. And the key question is whether that is needed for a satisfactory resolution of these issues.

This isn’t simply a matter of what you want. In response to these oddities, you might crave a general, systematic, explanatory theory of knowledge, justification, evidence, and the like, as well as of our language regarding such things. But consider: Do you need such a thing in order to satisfactorily reject the little lottery-based skeptical argument? If you think you do, why?

It might be suggested that we need such a thing insofar as we are doing philosophy. That might be how things look from within a certain strand of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy: it is part of the sociology of one swath of the discipline right now to assume that developing such a theory is precisely what philosophy is. But there are too many other things that are recognizable as philosophy to make it plausible that you aren’t doing philosophy unless you are contributing to such theory-building. So, we can’t just declare that only this is “philosophically satisfactory”. After all, if we find that for some reason the search for such a theory is hopeless, *that would be a philosophically interesting result*. And perhaps we could find something else that is recognizable as philosophy and meets the need.

From my methodological standpoint, it is an open question what it would take to satisfactorily resolve the lottery-style skeptical argument. A satisfactory resolution will be one that is sufficient to the needs of the case, but what are the needs of the case? One possibility is that there is a need that demands development of a general, systematic, explanatory theory of knowledge, justification, evidence, how they fit together with probabilistic notions, etc. If so, specification of this need will be important. Another possibility is that we can make do with something more local, perhaps including a little local conceptual engineering. Another possibility is that our prephilosophical commitments and an illuminating

description of how we actually proceed will be enough to remove any sense of puzzlement about what is going on even while it leaves things as they are.

It's not part of my methodology to claim in advance that every epistemological issue, let alone every philosophical issue, can be satisfactorily resolved in the way that I claim Cartesian-style external world skepticism can be dealt with. But it also shouldn't be assumed in advance that we know what is required for the satisfactory resolution of any particular issue. I regard this as a question for investigation. It will be interesting to learn where an approach like mine is enough, where more is needed, and why.

Notes

¹In this formulation, I commit what Azzouni calls a "use-mention error"; we can't substitute the same thing for "p" in each instance. But you know well enough what I mean nonetheless. The convenient shorthand is harmless, given the specific topic of our concern here and now.

²Azzouni hesitates to simply say that it is facts that are evidence. This is because he thinks that "Those facts are good evidence for your position" sounds bad. For what it's worth, it sounds fine to me. Azzouni hears it as involving a clash because "facts" is a count noun while "evidence" is a mass noun. It seems to me that here Azzouni is perhaps mistakenly taking the "is" of predication to be the "is" of identity. (He offers as a parallel, which he takes to be equally bad, "Those molecules are water" (32). This, too, sounds fine to me.)

³My formulations did distort matters in another way, however, since they obscure my primary methodology: my primary method is not to infer conclusions about the nature of knowledge, evidence, etc., from data about when it is appropriate to say thus and such, though I sometimes put things that way.

⁴Some of my formulations are occasionally incautious, as when I say things such as "P isn't evidence for anything unless it's true." That's an interesting point to notice, but it doesn't especially bother me, since these metaphysical issues don't matter for my purposes.

⁵I want to note, in passing, that I see problems with the particular way in which Azzouni distinguishes evidence and justification when he provides a theoretical characterization of the distinction (rather than focusing on examples):

[C]ontrary to what was shown about "evidence" earlier (in Section 10), what gets justified (or not justified) are *propositions*. Correspondingly, what gets justified (or not justified) are *beliefs*. (2025, 51)

This way of drawing the contrast looks confused. What was argued about evidence (in Section 10) concerned what sort of thing it is that constitutes or counts as evidence. Here, in this passage from p. 51, the issue is what sort of thing it is that *gets justified*. That is not a parallel to the issue that was discussed regarding evidence. The proper parallels would be between: (A) What constitutes or counts as evidence vs what counts as or constitutes a

justification/justifier, and (B) What sort of thing it is that evidence is evidence *for* vs. what sort of thing it is that justification is justification *for*. So far as I can see, for all Azzouni has said it remains open that what evidence is evidence for is propositions and beliefs, as he claims with regard to justification.

⁶For instance, here are just two relevant questions about the example: *Does this person have adequate evidence that they have hands?* (Perhaps the adequacy of their evidence is somehow undercut by the very real possibility that they might be a brain in a vat, or perhaps that very real possibility undercuts their possession of such evidence at all.) And is it really true that this person is not justified in believing that they have hands? (Imagine that they are in a world in which they could easily have become a brain in a vat—for instance, there are lots of unscrupulous researchers kidnapping people off the street and envatting them, and this person could very easily have been such a victim moments ago—but they have no idea that any of this is going on. Is *this* person justified in believing that they have hands? On one standard sense of “justified” in the epistemological literature, the answer seems to be obviously “yes”. This simply looks like a Gettier case.)

⁷A response along these lines to the BIV scenario, the dreaming scenario, and the deceiving demon scenario is the burden of chapters 4–7 of my book.

⁸I should note, to explain the parentheticals in this paragraph, that I regard “justified” as it appears in the epistemological literature as an undefined term of art. Its use is anchored by some familiar examples, some familiar distinctions, and familiar points of controversy. (Also, by using the word “sense” in the way that I do in this paragraph and elsewhere in this paper, I am not making a heavy-duty claim in the philosophy of language. Nothing of the sort is necessary for my purposes here.)

⁹Though if you are attempting to develop such a theory, I hope that you will take my results seriously as data. Of course, the precise way in which you do so will depend upon your other commitments.

¹⁰For discussion of such issues see the critical commentaries by Greco (2025), Hamawaki (2026), Kornblith (2025), Lawlor (2025), Neta (2025a), and Wright (2025), and my responses (2025; *Forthcoming a*; *Forthcoming b*; *Forthcoming c*). See also Neta’s review (2025b).

¹¹It isn’t obvious to me that this and only this is always the impetus for philosophy, but let that pass.

¹²I am grateful to Katy Abramson for helping me see this as well as for conversation relating to this paper as a whole.

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