RECONSIDERING CLOSURE, UNDERDETERMINATION, AND INFALLIBILISM

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Summary

Anthony Brueckner (1994, 2005) argues for a strong connection between the closure and the underdetermination argument for scepticism. Moreover, he claims that both arguments rest on infallibilism: In order to motivate the premises of the arguments, the sceptic has to refer to an infallibility principle. If this were true, fallibilists would be right in not taking the problems posed by these sceptical arguments seriously. As many epistemologists are sympathetic to fallibilism, this would be a very interesting result. However, in this paper I will argue that Brueckner's claims are wrong: The closure and the underdetermination argument are not as closely related as he assumes and neither rests on infallibilism. Thus even a fallibilist should take these arguments to raise serious problems that must be dealt with somehow.

1. Introduction

There are a vast number of sceptical arguments that differ along various parameters. Some sceptical arguments make essential use of so-called sceptical hypotheses in order to draw their sceptical conclusion. An argument makes essential use of a sceptical hypothesis, if it is possible to block the argument by ruling out the hypothesis or by knowing that the hypothesis in question is false. I will call arguments of this kind “Cartesian arguments” and the resulting form of scepticism “Cartesian scepticism”. There are two promising ways to argue for the sceptical conclusion that we know (almost) nothing about the external world via highlighting a sceptical hypothesis. One route to Cartesian scepticism is based on the closure and the other on the underdetermination principle. These two principles lead to different patterns of sceptical arguments: the closure and the underdetermination argument.

With regard to these two arguments Anthony Brueckner defended the following claims:
Claim A. The closure argument presupposes the underdetermination argument: In order to motivate one of the premises of the closure argument the sceptic has to refer to the underdetermination argument. As a consequence, the closure argument is superfluous in motivating Cartesian scepticism (Brueckner 1994, 830–833 und Brueckner 2005, 388ff.).

Claim B. The underdetermination argument and with it the closure argument are based on infallibilism: In order to motivate the premises of the arguments the sceptic has to refer to an infallibility principle. As a consequence, a fallibilist does not have to take these Cartesian arguments to raise a serious challenge (Brueckner 2005, 389f.).

Claim A is interesting because most of the contemporary discussions of scepticism are focused on the closure argument. If claim A were true, most of the discussions would be concerned with a superfluous argument. And claim B is interesting because most epistemologists are fallibilists. So if claim B were true, for most epistemologists Cartesian scepticism would not pose an interesting problem at all. Cartesian arguments for scepticism are philosophically interesting because their conclusion is very implausible but their premises are at least prima facie very plausible. The challenge is to locate the mistake in these arguments. But if claim B were true and sceptical arguments relied on an infallibility principle as a premise, then—at least for fallibilists—it would be very easy to locate the mistake in these arguments.

However, I will argue that Brueckner’s claims A and B are false. The closure argument is not superfluous and neither the closure nor the underdetermination argument rests on infallibilism. Before I give a short overview of the paper, let me make one further remark. This paper is not concerned with the logical relation of the two Cartesian arguments, which has been discussed by Stewart Cohen (1998) and Duncan Pritchard (2005). Both authors agree that the closure principle for justification entails the underdetermination principle but they also argue convincingly, contra Anthony Brueckner (1994), that the two principles are not equivalent.1 From a logical point of view we are thus faced with two distinct epistemic principles and therefore with two different sceptical arguments that employ these principles, respectively. However, it remains an interesting question, whether these arguments are interrelated in another sense: Is Brueckner right in thinking that the two Cartesian argu-

1. This seems especially true with regard to the underdetermination principle and the closure principle of knowledge. As it is not even clear whether the closure principle of knowledge entails the underdetermination principle. And it is the closure principle of knowledge with which I am concerned in this paper.