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Living with Uncertainty — A Plea for Enlightened Skepticism

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1 Why Interesting?

It has been claimed that life is impossible without knowledge and certainty, that the ability to survive and act purposefully in the world requires certainty and knowledge. If we are never certain, how can we ever do anything? Will we not be reduced to uncertain bewildered passivity?

In this short paper, I will briefly examine some of these assumptions and claim that “living with uncertainty” is not only a correct description of our lives but, in fact, also a normatively desirable state of affairs.

If we turn to science to try to find an answer to some of the questions above, we will find that on most of the issues (if we look deeply enough), there will be disagreement and so, in the end, we still have to exercise our own judgment. We will also find that on most issues, the information explosion has meant that there is very much, often far too much, information available, so that we have to form our opinion on only part of the information that exists. No one really has an overview of all of science any more and the lack of overview is unfortunately also increasingly true of the situation within single scientific areas and disciplines. Still, we may again ask if all of these factors motivating uncertainty prevent most of us from acting purposefully and continuing our lives?

2 Why Be Uncertain?

A basic reason for uncertainty is that the world, as far as we can understand, is far richer in information than any single human being can comprehend and probably also richer in information than we collectively as humans can comprehend. In our daily lives we are constantly confronted with uncertainties. What will the weather be like? Will there be another storm? What will the road traffic be like? Will there be a traffic jam? Will there be an accident? How are my savings doing? Will Nature be calm or will there be a natural disaster somewhere? Will our planet Earth collide with some asteroid or comet? Will war break out? Can we be safe from international terrorism? Will I catch some disease from some person I meet? Is the food we are eating really nutritious and safe or is it the opposite? Is the medicine I am getting really effective or will it have unforeseen side effects?

The list can be made much longer. Life is full of uncertainties and unforeseen consequences. Yet, this does not stop most of us from continuing our lives. In a sense, we have no other choice but to live with uncertainty.

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3 Knowledge, Certainty and Uncertainty

Let us now briefly discuss what epistemological backing we can find for recognizing, accepting and perhaps positively affirming a life in uncertainty. We will start by considering the most classical of all epistemic concepts, namely “knowledge” and its relation to “certainty”. “Knowledge” and “certainty” are closely linked. If we “know” something, we are usually “certain” of it and if we are “certain” of something, we think we know it. However, the picture becomes less clear if we analyze the relationship between “knowledge”, and “certainty” a little more closely.

In keeping with philosophical tradition, let us start by defining “knowledge” as “true, justified belief” and “certainty” as an attitude we have when we think there is no counter evidence to what we believe. A first consequence of this is that we see that “knowledge” and “certainty”, even if often associated, are not always necessarily linked. We can have a true justified belief (knowledge) without necessarily thinking that there is no counterevidence to the belief (certainty) and thus we can have knowledge without being certain. An example of this might occur, when a cautious person who is investigating some problem happens to stumble on the truth and as a result of the investigation also has justification for a particular belief about what has been found but is still uncertain about whether what he/she believes is true. Likewise, it is possible to be certain without having knowledge, if we think that there is no counter evidence to one of our beliefs (being certain) without it being the case that what we believe is a “true, justified belief” (i.e. not knowledge). Examples of certainty without knowledge fairly often occur in political or religious fanaticism. Adherents are very certain about beliefs which turn out neither to be true nor to have good justification.

Part of the reason for why the issue is so complex has to do with the traditional normative requirements on “knowledge” as “true, justified belief” We can often give good justification for our beliefs, but “truth” in the sense of “correspondence between our beliefs and reality” is much harder to ascertain and recognize.

An ancient response to this difficulty (already suggested by Socrates, cf. Plato 1892), is to become a skeptic with regard to knowledge. The most classic kind of skepticism holds that we can only know one thing, namely that “we cannot know anything”. The

position is often called “Academic skepticism”, since it was the view of knowledge propagated in the Platonic academy after Aristotle. “Academic skepticism” was later criticized by Pyrrhon, and following him also by his disciple Sextos Empiricos (from whose books we have most of our knowledge of the learning of antiquity) for not being skeptical enough (see Patrick 2006). Their criticism is simple and goes as follows — How do academic skeptics know that they do not know anything? Might it not be the case that one of the beliefs for which they have justification also happens to be true and that they therefore have knowledge. Pyrrhon and Sextos Empiricos advocated being more humble and accepting uncertainty. In fact, they claimed that if we learn to accept uncertainty, we can reach “ataraxia”, a state of mind that can be characterized as acceptance of uncertainty combined with “freedom from doubt”, a state of mind that allows us to actively live in the world with an inquisitive and open mind.

4 Some Consequences of Being Satisfied with Justified Belief

In line with this (unfortunately not sufficiently well known and understood) type of skepticism, I would like to suggest that the argument given above basically is still correct today and that we should in general when it comes to having a basis for our action, be satisfied with “justified belief”. This, of course, does not mean that “anything goes” and that we can lazily relax and stop caring about the correctness of our beliefs. On the contrary, good justification of belief involves striving to meet all the classical normative criteria of scientific methodology, while at the same time realizing that we probably have not been totally successful. We should therefore strive to make what we believe in “true”, “consistent”, “exhaustive”, “perspicuous”, “economic” and “fruitful”.

As aids in pursuing knowledge and truth in this sense, we can use the means traditionally recommended in science, i.e. observation (direct experience and clear evidential intuition) and the inductive methods based on observation as well as deduction and analysis, combined more indirectly with reliance on authority, i.e. reliance on trustworthy sources.

Living with uncertainty, however, means that we do not have absolute faith in these aids and that we are prepared to admit that all the goals connected with the search for truth have so far probably not actually been attained by science.

Rather, we should interpret the goals as regulative ideals (in the Kantian sense (cf. Kant 1781), i.e. as goals towards which we strive in science. Thus, we are pursuing truth, consistence, exhaustiveness, but have so far not been totally convinced that we have attained these goals. We recognize that beliefs for which we have good justification must be open for revision and could be shown to be wrong. Following Peirce (1931)¹ and Popper (1974), this attitude is sometimes known as “fallibilism”.

Realizing that we are “living with uncertainty”, thus, fosters an attitude of humility and open inquisitiveness. We don’t know everything and we might be wrong about what we think we know.

¹ Cf. paragraphs 147–149 of the untitled manuscript from c. 1897

One way to operationalize and live with this attitude is “to be more skeptical than most people about that which most experts believe is certain” and “to be somewhat less skeptical and more open to less conventionally accepted views that are dismissed by most people, including experts.

This way of living with uncertainty, which we might call “epistemic humility”, is not incompatible with forceful argumentation. Thus, in the face of opposition, we might well try to defend our justified beliefs as strongly as possible, in order to have them tested by good counter arguments from our interlocutors, all the while being ready to change our views if the arguments presented are better than our own.

Epistemic humility also has ethical consequences. It fosters an attitude of tolerance. It is mostly wise to give the other party the “benefit of the doubt”. If we are bent towards utilitarian ethics and believe that the actions that are ethically most desirable are the actions that have the maximally best consequences, epistemic humility can help use to accept that calculation of the consequences of most actions is a complex affair — so complex that in everyday life, living with uncertainty probably requires another approach. In the end, perhaps good intentions (Kant 1786) together with an estimate of consequences, which we realize is uncertain, is the best we can hope for.

Returning to the initial question of this paper “Is it possible to live with uncertainty and still act purposefully in the world?”, perhaps an attitude of what might be called “brave pessimism” or alternatively “skeptical optimism” might be recommended.

The human condition is such that upon reflection, it is hard to be fully certain. Mostly the best we can hope for is justified belief. In the face of a continuously changing world, knowledge and certainty should not be seen as qualities we already possess, but rather as ideal goals towards which we are continuously striving. In everyday life, certainty is not required, rather we should trust our justified beliefs and basic intuitions (sometimes provided by evolution) and act bravely but also cautiously, hoping for the best, being ready to show flexibility and to revise our beliefs and plans when this seems called for.

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