

Response

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There is much in Ms. Alcoff's paper that is interesting and worthy of careful consideration. For purposes of this forum I will try to restrict my comments to what I take to be Ms. Alcoff's major theses. They are in fact two in number, viz. 1) that Peirce's response to external world skepticism can explain why skepticism has so far resisted solution, and 2) that his response is a good one because it doesn't embrace skepticism nor does it beg the skeptic's question. My thesis is threefold: 1) Peirce's explanation of skepticism's long life is not new; 2) at least in some rather crucial places, Peirce's response to skepticism does beg the skeptic's question, which in itself may or may not be a good strategy; and 3) where Peirce does not beg the skeptic's question, his arguments are of little use in establishing external world Realism.

Peirce's explanation of skepticism's long life is supposed to come from his claim that the skeptic's doubt does not arise out of practical activity and therefore is not really doubt at all (Alcoff 10). But Cavell forces Ms. Alcoff to recognize that because of the phenomenon of perceptual error, the skeptic's doubt in fact might arise out of practical activity. Ms. Alcoff then appeals to a slightly different distinction, but one she thinks still reflects the essence of what Peirce had in mind. This distinction is between doubts that are resolvable and those that are not, even in principle. But what made this explanation a candidate for a creative explanation was its appeal to practical activity. With that reference gone the explanation is just that skepticism hasn't been resolved because it can't be resolved. And this explanation is certainly not new with Peirce. Anyone who responds to skepticism by claiming that it is a pseudo problem and thus involves a question that deserves to be begged has assumed the above explanation for skepticism's resistance to resolution.

Did Peirce beg the skeptic's question? His appeal to two different kinds of doubt would make us think so. The skeptic's doubt is a pseudo doubt so why isn't the skeptic's problem a pseudo problem? Ms. Alcoff doesn't believe this follows but her reasons at the end of the

first section are not very convincing. She says that if Peirce had thought skepticism a pseudo problem he would not have rejected the correspondence theory of truth and opted for a form of fallibilism (Alcoff 11). Several alarms go off here. As Ms. Alcoff indicates in a footnote, it is not clear that Peirce did reject the correspondence theory of truth. Also, if one considers skepticism a pseudo problem, must one adopt the correspondence theory of truth? I don't see why. And lastly, does a correspondence theory of truth necessarily entail the adoption of some theory of infallible knowledge? Again, I don't see why. If one can view skepticism as a pseudo problem, without adopting a correspondence theory of truth, then even if we assume that Peirce rejected the correspondence theory, we have as yet no reason to think that Peirce did not view skepticism as a pseudo problem.

Ms. Alcoff attempts to show in the second part of her paper that Peirce's arguments for science save him from the charge of begging the skeptic's question. She says she is presenting one argument, but it seems to me there are several. In what follows I will comment on what I take to be the arguments Ms. Alcoff is most concerned with. There are, it seems to me, four of these.

The first two arguments for the scientific method are attempts to show that science is the best method for settling opinions, i.e., arriving at a consensus. The first argument claims that "science is the best method of settling opinion because it yields more intersubjective conclusions than any other" (Alcoff 13). Now this argument may not beg the skeptic's question but it certainly is a question begging argument. It says simply that science is the best method of settling opinions because it is good at settling opinions. While that is true enough, it can hardly provide anyone with a good reason for adopting the scientific method. And if that is true, the above argument will be of little use in an attempt to support Realism via the scientific method. (Incidentally, this raises the question of how an argument for the scientific method is supposed to support Realism since science doesn't presuppose Realism. All science presupposes is the regularity of experience).

The second argument for the scientific method is quite similar to the first. It runs as follows: ". . . we have less conscious control over the outcome of scientific inquiry than we have over inquiry based on any other method. Therefore, the method of science is the best method to use for settling opinion" (Alcoff 13). This argument at least appears more plausible than the last because it avoids the naive view of science wherein the scientific method is thought to be void of the blights of "tenacity," "authority," and "the a priori" as Peirce calls them. However, it should not be too difficult to see that this argument fares no

better than the first. In fact, it actually fares much worse because this argument does beg the skeptic's question. For by appealing to a method wherein the person has less conscious control over the outcome, we are assuming that reality is in fact objective rather than subjective. Perhaps the scientific method does exert less conscious control over inquiry than any other method. This will not be a reason for adopting this method unless we also believe that reality is objective. And this latter is precisely what the skeptic is so far unwilling to believe.

Ms. Alcoff's third and fourth arguments can be commented on together. The third argument claims that 1) Inquiry is motivated by doubt, 2) science is the best method for dispelling doubt, 3) science presupposes that our knowledge extends beyond the content of subjective experience, therefore, 4) Inquiry, or at least the best kind of inquiry, presupposes a knowledge extending beyond that provided by subjective experience. The fourth argument runs as follows:

We cannot not act, and to act is to presuppose belief, and to believe is to presuppose that we can have knowledge beyond the content of our own subjective experiences. Therefore, we cannot act in a way that is consistent with skepticism (Alcoff 14).

The reason we can comment on these two arguments together is that both of them make a crucial change in the argument. Neither of these arguments are arguments for Realism. Or at least they are not arguments for the kind of Realism the skeptic has traditionally been interested in. To argue for the possibility of knowledge that extends beyond the content of our subjective experiences is to argue for an epistemological Realism that is significantly different from ordinary common sense, external world Realism. The former is compatible with Phenomenalism and Idealism while the latter is not. Thus these two arguments will be of little use against external world skepticism.

I have argued that at crucial points Peirce's response to external world skepticism does beg the question and where it does not it will nonetheless be rather unhelpful in establishing Realism. I have not, however, claimed that begging the question against skepticism is necessarily inappropriate. In fact, it seems to me the most reasonable response one could make. In the words of the venerable Thomas Reid:

But how does a man know that he is not in a delirium? I cannot tell: neither can I tell how a man knows that he exists. But if any man seriously doubts whether he is in a delirium, I think it highly likely that he is, and that it is time

to seek for a cure, which I am persuaded he will not find in the whole system of logic" (Works 107b).