

Introduction to Philosophy

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Bin Zhao

Epistemology: Skepticism

Skeptics claim that we don't know or have justification to believe various things that we ordinarily think that we do.

Force of a skeptical claim = what epistemic status it says we don't have (knowledge, justified belief, evidence, etc.)

Scope of a skeptical claim = what range of beliefs the claim targets (beliefs about the external world, beliefs about the future, beliefs about things we haven't observed)

Caution: Skeptics don't say that the relevant beliefs are *false*, just that they're not *known*, etc.

E.g., atheists are not skeptics (in the relevant sense) about the existence of God.

Arguments that we don't know much (if anything) about the external world:

The Possibility of Error Argument

1. For almost any of your beliefs about the external world, that belief could be mistaken.
2. If your belief that p could be mistaken, then you don't know that p.
3. So, you know almost nothing about the external world.

from Descartes's *Meditations*

The Certainty Argument

1. If you know that p, then you're absolutely certain that p.
2. You're not absolutely certain of anything about the external world.
3. So, you know nothing about the external world.

psychological certainty vs epistemic certainty as having maximally strong reasons.

The Transmissibility Argument 传递性论证

1. S doesn't know that (SK) is false, e.g., S is not a brain-in-a-vat.
2. If S doesn't know that (SK) is false, e.g., S is not a brain-in-a-vat, then S doesn't know (O), e.g., S has two hands.
3. S doesn't know (O), e.g., S has two hands.

What motivates 1?

By hypothesis, I can't tell the difference between ordinary experience and envatted experience.

What motivates 2?

Epistemic Closure: If S knows p and competently deduces q from p, thereby coming to believe q, while retaining S's knowledge that p, S comes to know that q.

Responses to the Skeptical Arguments:

Moorean Response

Where **philosophy** and **commonsense** come into conflict, one can legitimately go with the **latter**. Therefore,

1. S knows (O), e.g., S has two hands.
2. If S knows (O), e.g., S has two hands, then S knows that (SK) is false, e.g., S is not a brain-in-a-vat.
3. S knows that (SK) is false, e.g., S is not a brain-in-a-vat.

However, Moorean response doesn't explain why the skeptical arguments, e.g., the transmissibility argument, *seem* good.

Putnam's Argument Against Skepticism

Putnam aims to *prove* that you're not a brain-in-a-vat on the basis of semantic externalism.

Semantic Externalism

The meaning of a term is determined, in part, by factors external to the speaker.

Twin Earth. Twin Earth is much like Earth, except that the stuff in the rivers, lakes, and oceans there is not made of H₂O as it is on Earth, but of some other element; call that other chemical XYZ. So that stuff is not water. We can call it twater. The folks on Twin Earth speak a language that is structurally identical to English. But when they use the word 'water' they are referring to twater, not water. When they look out at the ocean and say, "There is so much water here!", what they say is, in their language, *true*, even though there is no water in the ocean they are looking at.

According to semantic externalism, the meaning of "water" is different on Twin Earth than it is on Earth. Thus, residents of Twin Earth speak a different language than we do. Let's call it Twinglish:

'water' refers to:

'There is water' is true just in case:

English: water (the stuff composed of H₂O) There is water around.

Twinglish: twater (the stuff composed of XYZ) There is twater around.

Similarly, my BIV-twin doesn't refer to trees when he says (or thinks) "tree". He refers to a "tree-in-the-image", or perhaps the complicated electronic stimulations that lead him to have a visual experience of a tree. Thus, my BIV-twin speaks (and thinks) in a different language than I do.

Reconstructions of Putnam's Argument

Here is the first reconstruction of his proof:

1. When I say or think that "I am not a brain-in-a-vat," I mean that I am not a brain-in-a-vat.
2. When a brain in a vat says or thinks that "I am not a brain in a vat," he means something else; e.g., he is not a brain-in-the-image in a vat-in-the-image.
3. Thus, I am not a brain-in-a-vat.

Semantic externalism implies that 1 is true. But even if we accept semantic externalism, and hence that this proof is sound, there is a serious defect. If you're in a position where you don't know whether you're a brain in a vat or not, you won't be inclined to accept 1. 1 thus shares a defect with what we might call Moore's Proof:

1. I have hands.
2. Brains-in-vats don't have hands.
3. Thus, I am not a brain in a vat.

Moore's Proof is sound, but if you're in doubt about whether you're a BIV, you'll be in doubt about whether or not 1 is true. Hence the proof won't be any good in helping you come to know that you're not a BIV.

Here is the second reconstruction of his proof that does not share this defect:

1. Either I am a BIV or I am not.
2. If I am a BIV, then when I say or think that "I am not a BIV," what I mean is that I am not a brain-in-the-image in a vat-in-the-image.
3. If I am a BIV, then when I say or think that "I am not a BIV," what I say or think is true. (from 2)
4. If I am not a BIV, then when I say or think "I am not a BIV," what I mean is that I am not a brain in a vat.
5. If I am not a BIV, when I say or think "I am not a BIV," what I say or think is true. (from 4)
6. Thus, When I say or think that "I am not a BIV," what I say or think is true. (from 1, 3, 5)

One challenge to the reconstruction is that you might think there is a difference between proving that what you say when you say "I am not a BIV" is true, and proving that you are not a BIV.

Another challenge is related to the possibility that you are a recently envatted brain.

Relevant Alternatives Theory

Relevant Alternatives Theory: To know some proposition p, one must be able to rule out all the **relevant** alternatives to p.

The proposition on which “S knows that p” operate must be understood as embedded within a matrix of relevant alternatives. S knows that p, but S does so within a framework of competing alternatives A, B, and C. Moreover, if the possibility D is not within this network of relevant alternatives, then even though not-D follows necessarily from the fact, p, S does not need to rule out D.

Relevancy

Dretske says that a relevant alternative is an alternative that a person must be in an evidential position to exclude (when he knows that p).

An Inconsistent Trio

1. S doesn't know that (SK) is false, e.g., S is not a brain-in-a-vat.
2. If S doesn't know that (SK) is false, e.g., S is not a brain-in-a-vat, then S doesn't know (O), e.g., S has two hands; if S knows (O), e.g., S has two hands, then S knows that (SK) is false, e.g., S is not a brain-in-a-vat.
3. S knows (O), e.g., S has two hands.

Relevant Alternative Theorists would deny 2 at the cost of denying the epistemic closure principle because the relevant alternatives for -(SK) and (O) are different.

Epistemic Closure: If S knows p and competently deduces q from p, thereby coming to believe q, while retaining S's knowledge that p, S comes to know that q.

Contextualism

语境主义

Contextualism: Knowledge is a context-sensitive notion. More precisely, whether a statement like “S knows that p” expresses a truth depends on the context of ascription, such that two people, in different contexts of ascription, could both assert this sentence and yet only one of them speaks truly.

Context-Sensitive Notions

Whether or not you can truly call someone “tall” depends upon the context, e.g.,

Henry is nine years old and just shy of five feet tall. The average height for a nine-year-old is four feet six. Consider two different conversational contexts:

Low

We're talking about the other nine year olds in Henry's class. I say,
“Henry is tall! He's almost five feet!”

High

We're talking about NBA basketball players.
I say “Henry is not tall! He's not even five feet!”

It seems that I've spoken truly in both Low and High. That's because what it takes to be truly called “tall” depends on the conversational context:

	“Henry is tall”	“Henry is not tall”
Low	<i>True</i>	<i>False</i>
High	<i>False</i>	<i>True</i>

Other context-sensitive notions include “I”, “this”, “on the right”, “quantifiers”, etc.

Contextualism and Skepticism

Contextualism opens up a novel approach to skeptical arguments. Consider two contexts:

Ordinary

We're out at the bar talking about our unfortunate friend who lost both his hands in a freak skiing accident. My friend says, “Hey, you shouldn't complain so much! Be grateful. At least you have hands!”

I say, “Of course. I know I have hands!”

Skeptical

We're in an epistemology class talking about the possibility that we're all handless-brains-in-vats. You say, “Look, if you were a BIV, everything would seem to you just as it does now. You can't be sure that your not a handless BIV. So how do you know you have hands?”

I say, "You're right. I don't know that I have hands."

Given contextualism, we can say that I've spoken truly in both contexts:

	"I know that I have hands."	"I don't know that I have hands."
Ordinary	<i>True</i>	<i>False</i>
Skeptical	<i>False</i>	<i>True</i>

Contextualists claim that purely in virtue of skeptical error-possibilities being raised and attended to, they become relevant, and hence are able to deprive one of knowledge. (More precisely, a statement that one has knowledge no longer expresses a truth). But in everyday contexts where skeptical error-possibilities have not been raised, and are not made relevant via any other rule, then they can be properly ignored, and hence knowledge is easy to possess.

Problems with Contextualism

Epistemic Descent: Once we've considered skeptical hypotheses, how are we able to epistemically "descend" thereafter back to everyday contexts and thereby become reunited with our knowledge?

Semantic Blindness: Isn't there something odd about the claim that a millennia-old philosophical problem turns out to trade on a simple misunderstanding about language? Could we really be so blind about the meaning of such an everyday term?

Unspeakable Knowledge: Contextualism is also committed to the view that there are many true propositions that we know are true, but that are such that it is impossible for us to truthfully assert that we know them.