

Module 9: Skepticism

1. Introduction \wedge Distinctions

We have investigated a number of theories of knowledge and epistemic justification. You may now think that none of the theories are adequate and that either (1) we don't have knowledge or epistemic justification, or (2) we can't have knowledge about *the nature of knowledge* or *justification*. First, a few distinctions.

S is a *philosophical skeptic* =Df. (1) S believes that many of the things normally claimed to be known (or justified) are not known (or not justified).

S is a *philosophical skeptic about knowledge* =Df. (1) S rejects the claim that people have any or certain kinds of knowledge.

S is a *philosophical skeptic about epistemic justification* =Df. (1) S rejects the claim that people have any or certain kinds of epistemic justification.

S is a *global philosophical skeptic* =Df. (1) S rejects that we have any knowledge (or justification).

S is a *local philosophical skeptic* =Df. (1) S rejects that we have knowledge (or justification) about particular issues.

	global	local
knowledge	global philosophical skeptic ab/ knowledge	local philosophical skeptic ab/ knowledge
justification	global philosophical skeptic ab/ justification	local philosophical skeptic ab/ justification

2. Four Arguments for Skepticism

Arg. #1: The Skeptical Certainty Argument	
1	For any <i>S</i> , <i>S</i> cannot be certain about the nature of the external world.
2	For any <i>S</i> , <i>S</i> knows that <i>p</i> if and only if <i>S</i> is certain that <i>p</i> .
3	Therefore, for every <i>S</i> , <i>S</i> cannot know anything about the external world.

The above argument argues for global philosophical skepticism by claiming that the necessary and sufficient condition for knowledge is certainty. That is, to the philosophical global skeptic, there is no distinction between *knowing that p* and *knowing that p with complete certainty*.

In order to evaluate the above argument, consider each premise. **Premise 1** seems true. There are many things that we don't have certainty about. The controversial premise is **premise 2**. This premise states that one has knowledge that *p* if and only if one is certain that *p*. To many, this seems like an unacceptably high standard for what counts as knowledge and is contrary to the standard (or ordinary) notion of knowledge.

In order to capture more of the meaning underlying the notion of ‘knowledge’, the skeptic might try and weaken his/her commitment to premise 2 by arguing for the following.

Arg. #2: Skeptical Infallibility Argument	
1	For any S , S is not <i>infallible</i> (nor certain) about the nature of the external world.
2	For any S , S knows that p if and only if S is infallible (or certain) that p .
3	Therefore, for every S , S cannot know anything about the external world.

Again, **premise 1** seems true for it isn’t the case that it is *impossible* for us to be wrong about a belief that p which has to do with the external world. The controversial premise is again **premise 2**. However, premise 2 suffers from the same problem as the **Skeptical Certainty Argument** since the ordinary concept of knowledge does not require certainty or infallibility. Importantly, while knowledge that p requires that (1) p be true, it does not require that (2) S cannot be wrong that p . Thus, the argument for global philosophical skepticism fails.

Another skeptical argument tries to draw on the skeptic’s intuition that our *evidence* for certain commonly-believed propositions is the *same* as our evidence for certain propositions that are denied. For example, an external world skeptic might claim that there is no more reason to think that the nature of the external world resembles how we perceive it than one produced by an evil demon (or because we are brains in vats). The evidence, so the skeptic argues, is exactly the same.

Arg.#3: Skeptical Argument from Same Evidence	
1	Assume that S ’s evidence for p is the same as S ’s evidence for q , and that p is false.
2	S ’s belief that p is not knowledge (because p is false).
3	If S ’s belief that p is not knowledge, then S ’s belief that q is not knowledge.
4	Therefore, S does not know that q .

The controversial premise is thought to be **premise 3**. Premise 3 is thought to be false because it makes the standard of knowledge too demanding (just like the previous two arguments). The non-skeptic claims that we can have *non-conclusive evidence* which allows S to know that q even if S ’s evidence for q is the same as S ’s evidence for p . Here is an example.

Suppose on Wednesday April 14th I see my good friends John and Jill eating ice cream cones. John and Jill are married, they have told me numerous times that vanilla is their favorite flavor, that they almost always order vanilla, and that they always get a vanilla ice cream cone to celebrate their anniversary on April 14th. Thus, I believe the following:

- (1) John is eating a vanilla ice cream cone.
- (2) Jill is eating a vanilla ice cream cone.

My evidence for (1) is the same as (2). However, if (2) turns out to be false because the Jill was given butter pecan by accident, then (2) is not knowledge. But, if (2) is not knowledge, then, (1) is not knowledge. But, we want to say that (1) *is knowledge*

precisely because it is believed, justified by evidence, and it is true. That is, we want to say (1) is knowledge because while it is possible for (1) to be false (by some accident or weird scenario), this does not mean that we cannot know that (1) is true when it is supported by nonconclusive evidence.

Let's return to the **Skeptical Infallibility Argument**. The skeptic will argue:

- (1) Assume that S's belief that *p* counts as knowledge.
- (2) If S's belief that *p* counts as knowledge, then *p* is true.
- (3) If S's belief that *p* counts as knowledge and *p* is true, then S is not mistaken about *p*.
- (4) From (1)–(3), it follows that S is not mistaken about *p*.
- (5) If S is not mistaken about *p*, then S is infallible about *p*.
- (4) Therefore, if S's belief that *p* is knowledge, then S is infallible about *p*.

Lines (2) and (3) are necessarily true, and (4) is necessarily true in virtue of being entailed by (1)–(3). Premise (5), however, is false. To see this more clearly, let's rephrase (5) in a more explicit fashion.

(5*) if S is **not** mistaken about *p*, then S **must not** be mistaken about *p*.

This is false for we can imagine many scenarios where S is not mistaken but where S could have been mistaken. To put this in a different way, premise (5) and (5*) insist that if *S knows p* then *S definitely knows p*. Thus, at root, this argument is no different than the **Skeptical Certainty Argument** which uses an unacceptably high standard for what counts as knowledge.

A fourth argument for skepticism runs as follows.

Arg.#4: The Argument from Ignorance	
1	S knows that <i>p</i> only if S knows that <i>not-q</i> .
2	S does <i>not</i> know that <i>not-q</i> .
3	Therefore, S does not know that <i>p</i> .

A concrete example might run as follows.

Arg.#4: The Argument from Ignorance (No Hands)	
1	S knows that S has hands only if S knows that it is not the case that S is a brain in a vat that lacks hands.
2	S does not know that it is not the case that S is a brain in the vat that lacks hands.
3	Therefore, does <i>not</i> know that S has hands.

The argument is deductively valid. Motivating **premise 1** is the following principle.

Exclusion Principle: S knows that *p* only if S knows that every proposition incompatible with *p* (e.g. *q, r, s, t*) is not the case. In other words, S knows that *p* only if S can exclude every *incompatible* alternative.

Here is a concrete example. Assume that someone was murdered and the murderer acted alone. An honest police officer arrests two suspects and is faced with two propositions.

- (p) John is the murderer

(q) Frank is the murderer

According to the exclusion principle, the police officer knows that John is the murderer only if the the police officer knows that Frank is *not* the murderer.

There are two reasons motivating **premise 2**. The first is that it seems to be *prima facie* the case. Some might argue that it is obvious that we do not know that we are brains in vats that lack hands.

The second is because of a sensitivity requirement on knowledge.

Sensitivity Principle: S knows that *p* only if S's belief that *p* is sensitive. That is, if *p* were false, then S would no longer believe *p*.

According to the sensitivity principle, S knows that *p* only if S's willingness to believe that *p* is sensitive to the truth or falsity of *p*.

Imagine two scenarios. First, imagine that S have a set amount of justification *j*, S believes that *p*, and *p* is true. Here S has knowledge. Second, imagine that S has the same amount of justification *j*, S believes that *p*, but *p* is false. Here, S does not have knowledge because *p* is false. The skeptic argues that since S would believe *p* in either scenario, S's belief that *p* is not sensitive to the truth or falsity of *p*, and therefore we should not say that S has knowledge in either case.

3. Six Arguments Against Skepticism

3.1 The Sensitivity Principle is not Universally True

There are necessary truths that are not sensitive since they cannot be false.

3.2 The Sensitivity Principle is Too Strong.

The sensitivity principle uses the term 'knowledge' in an unacceptable way. In the Certainty and Infallibility arguments, the use of the term 'knowledge' involved the claim that in order for S to know that *p*, S's evidence for *p* is conclusive, infallible, etc. This is not the normal use of the term 'knowledge'. In the Argument from Ignorance, the sensitivity requirement claims that S knows that *p* only if S's belief that *p* is sensitive to scenarios were *p* **could be** false. This is a roundabout way of claiming that knowledge requires certainty, infallibility, etc.

3.3 Premise 2 is False

Arg.#4: The Argument from Knowledge (I have Hands)	
1	S knows that S has hands only if S knows that it is not the case that S is a brain in a vat that lacks hands.
2	S knows that S has hands.
3	Therefore, S knows that it is not the case that S is a brain in a vat that lacks hands.

Premise 1 in both arguments are the same, but **premise 2** in the Argument from Knowledge is more justified than Premise 2 in the Argument from Ignorance.

3.4 Premise 1 is False

Premise (1) states:

(1) S knows that p only if S knows that $not-q$.

This is false because one can know p and yet fail to know $not-q$. In the case of the no-hands example, S can know that S has hands and fail to know that S is a brain in a vat that lacks hands. The reason (1) is false is because (1) is too strong. It eliminates cases that should be counted as knowledge. In order for something to be knowledge, the relevant principle is the following:

(1*) S knows that p only if S knows that $not-q$, and $not-q$ is a relevant alternative.

In particular, consider the following argument.

Arg.#4: The Argument from Ignorance (No Hands)	
1	S knows that S has hands only if S knows that it is not the case that S is a brain in a vat that lacks hands.
2	S does not know that it is not the case that S is a brain in the vat that lacks hands.
3	Therefore, does <i>not</i> know that S has hands.

Premise (1) is false because in order for S to know that S has hands, S only needs to know that the relevant alternatives are false. Since the proposition ‘S is a brain in a vat that lacks hands’ is not a relevant alternative, premise 1 is false.

3.4.1 Objections

Objection #1: What counts as a relevant alternative?

Objection #2: ‘S knows that S has hands’ entails that ‘S is a brain in the vat that does not have hands’ is false. But, according to the relevant alternatives theory, S does not know that ‘S is a brain in a vat that does not have hands’. How can S not know $not-q$ even though $not-q$ is explicitly entailed by S knowing that p ?

3.5 Contextualism

The meaning of certain terms depends upon the context. The term ‘tall’ means something different when it is uttered in the context of horse jockeys as opposed to when it is uttered about basketball players. Another example is ‘flat’. When you make your bed or driving through parts of the Midwest (like Indiana), you might say that the your bed or Indiana is ‘flat’, but this is different from when you are talking about a sheet of flat sheet of metal or a geometrical shape.

The meaning of ‘knows’ is also context sensitive such that there are contexts where *know* is subjected to a *high standard* and contexts where *know* is subjected to a *low standard*. So, consider the following proposition

(a) John is sitting next to me.

Assume that John is a good friend of mine and I believe (a). Using a low to moderate standard for ‘know’, I might claim

(b) I know (a)

because my belief is justified by perception, my long-time acquaintance with John, and my ability to discriminate John from Victor or Jill. Someone could, however, claim that (b) is false because of an evil demon could be tricking you, because you could be a brain in a vat, or because John could have a twin brother he’s never told you about. So, they assert

(c) You don’t know (a).

The contextualist will claim that the two uses of ‘know’ in (b) and (c) are not the same. In (b) ‘know’ is used in a context with a low-to-moderate-standard while in (c) ‘know’ is used in a context with a high-standard. But, if meaning is relative to context, and the contexts in which (b) and (c) are uttered in different contexts, then (c) is not the rejection of (b).

So, the contextualist claims that **The Argument from Ignorance** is correct only if it applies to a context where ‘know’ is used with a high standard. **The Argument from Ignorance** is incorrect if it applies to a context where ‘know’ is used with a moderate-to-low standard. Alternatively, **The Argument from Knowledge** is correct only if it applies to a context where ‘know’ is used with a moderate-to-low standard, but incorrect when applied to a context with a high standard.

3.5.2 Objections

Objection #1: We know that we have hands even in contexts involving high standards.

Objection #2: Contextualism is skepticism, and skepticism is wrong.