

CHAPTER NINE

PHILOSOPHICAL SKEPTICISM

9.1 Introductory Discourse

Epistemic skepticism questions whether knowledge is possible at all. Generally speaking, skeptics argue that knowledge requires certainty, and that most or all of our beliefs are fallible (meaning that our grounds for holding them always, or almost always, fall short of certainty), which would together entail that knowledge is always or almost always impossible for us. Characterizing knowledge as strong or weak is dependent on a person's viewpoint and their characterization of knowledge. Much of modern epistemology is derived from attempts to better understand and address philosophical skepticism.

9.2 Ancient Skepticism

There were at least two kinds of ancient skepticism: academic skepticism and Pyrrhonism. The first, Academic Skepticism, arose in the Academy (the school founded by Plato) in the 3rd century BCE and was propounded by the Greek philosopher Arcesilaus (c. 315–c. 240 BCE), about whom Cicero (106–43 BCE), Sextus Empiricus (flourished 3rd century CE), and Diogenes Laërtius (flourished 3rd century CE) provide information.¹²² The Academic Skeptics, who are sometimes called “dogmatic” Skeptics, argued that nothing could be known with certainty. That form of Skepticism seems susceptible to the objection, raised by the Stoic Antipater (flourished c. 135 BCE) and others, that the view is self-contradictory.¹²³ To know that knowledge is impossible is to know something. Hence, dogmatic Skepticism must be false.

Carneades (c. 213–129 BCE), also a member of the Academy, developed a subtle reply to the charge. Academic Skepticism, he insisted, is not a theory about knowledge or the world but rather a kind of argumentative strategy. According to the strategy, the Skeptic does not try to prove that he knows nothing. Instead, he simply assumes that he knows nothing and defends that assumption against attack.¹²⁴ The burden of proof, in other words, is on those who believe that knowledge is possible.

Carneades' interpretation of Academic Skepticism renders it very similar to the other major kind, Pyrrhonism, which takes its name from Pyrrhon of Elis (c. 365–275 BCE). Pyrrhonists, while not asserting or denying anything, attempted to show that one ought to suspend judgment and avoid making any knowledge claims at all, even the negative claim that nothing is known.¹²⁵ The Pyrrhonist's strategy was to show that for every proposition supported by some evidence, there is an opposite proposition supported by evidence that is equally good. Such arguments, which are designed to refute both sides of an issue, are known as “tropes.” The judgment that a tower is round when seen at a distance, for example, is contradicted by the judgment that the

¹²²A.H. Armstrong. *An Introduction to Ancient Philosophy* (Methuen: London University, 1965), 32-33.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

tower is square when seen up close. The judgment that Providence cares for all things, which is supported by the orderliness of the heavenly bodies, is contradicted by the judgment that many good people suffer misery and many bad people enjoy happiness. The judgment that apples have many properties—shape, colour, taste, and aroma—each of which affects a sense organ, is contradicted by the equally good possibility that apples have only one property that affects each sense organ differently.

What is at stake in such arguments is “the problem of the criterion” – that is, the problem of determining a justifiable standard against which to measure the worth or validity of judgments, or claims to knowledge. According to the Pyrrhonists, every possible criterion is either groundless or inconclusive. Thus, suppose that something is offered as a criterion. The Pyrrhonist will ask what justification there is for it. If no justification is offered, then the criterion is groundless. If, on the other hand, a justification is produced, then the justification itself is either justified or it is not. If it is not justified, then again the criterion is groundless. If it is justified, then there must be some criterion that justifies it. But this is just what the dogmatist was supposed to have provided in the first place.

If the Pyrrhonist needed to make judgments in order to survive, he would be in trouble. In fact, however, there is a way of living that bypasses judgment. One can live quite nicely, according to Sextus, by following custom and accepting things as they appear. In doing so, one does not judge the correctness of anything but merely accepts appearances for what they are.¹²⁶

Ancient Pyrrhonism is not strictly an epistemology, since it has no theory of knowledge and is content to undermine the dogmatic epistemologies of others, especially Stoicism and Epicureanism. Pyrrho himself was said to have had ethical motives for attacking dogmatists: being reconciled to not knowing anything, Pyrrho thought, induced serenity (*ataraxia*).¹²⁷

9.3 Kinds of Skepticism

Much of modern epistemology aims to address one or another kind of skepticism. Skepticism is a challenge to our pre-philosophical conception of ourselves as cognitively successful or epistemic beings. Such challenges come in many varieties. One way in which these varieties differ, concerns the different kinds of cognitive success that they target: skepticism can challenge our claims to know, or our claims to believe justifiably, or our claims to have justification for believing, or our claims to have any good reasons for belief whatsoever. But another way in which these varieties differ is in whether the skepticism in question is fully general—targeting the possibility of enjoying any instance of the relevant cognitive success—or is selective—targeting the possibility of enjoying the relevant cognitive success concerning a particular subject

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

matter (e.g., the past, the minds of others, the world beyond our own consciousness), or concerning beliefs formed by a particular method (e.g., perception, memory, reasoning, etc.).

9.3.1 Extreme/Mild Skepticism

Epistemological skepticism can be classified as either mitigated/extreme or unmitigated/mild skepticism. Mitigated skepticism rejects strong or strict knowledge claims but does approve weaker ones, which can be considered virtual knowledge, but only with regard to justified beliefs. Unmitigated skepticism rejects claims of both virtual and strong knowledge.¹²⁸ Characterizing knowledge as strong, weak, virtual or genuine can be determined differently depending on a person's viewpoint as well as their characterization of knowledge.¹²⁹

9.3.2 Pyrrhonism

One of the oldest forms of epistemic skepticism can be found in Agrippa's trilemma (named after the Pyrrhonist philosopher Agrippa the Skeptic) which demonstrates that certainty cannot be achieved with regard to beliefs.¹³⁰ Pyrrhonism dates back to Pyrrho of Elis from the 4th century BCE, although most of what we know about Pyrrhonism today is from the surviving works of Sextus Empiricus.¹³¹ Pyrrhonists claim that for any argument for a non-evident proposition, an equally convincing argument for a contradictory proposition can be produced. Pyrrhonists do not dogmatically deny the possibility of knowledge, but instead point out that beliefs about non-evident matters cannot be substantiated.

9.3.3 Cartesian Skepticism

The Cartesian evil demon problem, first raised by René Descartes, supposes that our sensory impressions may be controlled by some external power rather than the result of ordinary veridical perception. In such a scenario, nothing we sense would actually exist, but would instead be mere illusion. As a result, we would never be able to know anything about the world, since we would be systematically deceived about everything. The conclusion often drawn from evil demon skepticism is that even if we are not completely deceived, all of the information provided by our senses is still *compatible* with skeptical scenarios in which we are completely deceived, and that we must therefore either be able to exclude the possibility of deception or else must deny the possibility of *infallible* knowledge (that is, knowledge which is completely certain) beyond our immediate sensory impressions.¹³² While the view that no beliefs are beyond doubt other than our immediate sensory impressions is often ascribed to Descartes, he in fact thought that we *can* exclude the possibility that we are systematically deceived, although his reasons for

¹²⁸ Stathis Psillos and Martin Curd, *The Routledge companion to philosophy of science* (London: Routledge, 2010), 133.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ Cf. Richard Popkin, "Skepticism," In Edwards, Paul (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Philosophy Volume 7* (London: Macmillan, 1972), 449.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² W. James, and G. Gunn, *Pragmatism and other Essays*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 14.

thinking this are based on a highly contentious ontological argument for the existence of a benevolent God who would not allow such deception to occur.¹³³

9.3.4 General Skepticism

General skepticism is motivated by reasoning from some apparently conflicting features of the kind of cognitive success in question. For instance, a general skeptic might claim that justification requires a regress of justifiers, but then argue that this regress of justifiers cannot be contained in any finite mind—and thus, the skeptic might conclude, no finite being can be justified in believing anything. Alternatively a general skeptic might claim that knowledge requires certainty, and that nobody can be certain of something unless there is nothing of which he could be even more certain—thus, the skeptic might conclude, we can know virtually nothing.¹³⁴

9.3.5 Selective Skepticism

Selective skepticism, in contrast, is typically motivated by appeal to one or another skeptical hypothesis. A skeptical hypothesis is a hypothesis according to which the facts that you claim to know (whether these facts concern the past, or the mind of others, or the mind-independent world, or what have you) may, for all you can tell, be radically different from how they appear to you to be. Thus, a skeptical hypothesis is a hypothesis that distinguishes between the way things appear to you, on the one hand, and the way they really are, on the other; and this distinction is deployed in such a way as to pose a challenge to your cognitive success concerning the latter. Here are some examples of skeptical hypotheses:¹³⁵

- i. All the other humans around me are automata who simply act exactly as if they have thoughts and feelings.
- ii. The whole universe was created no more than 5 minutes ago, replete with fake memories and other misleading evidence concerning a distant past.
- iii. I am lying in my bed dreaming everything that I am aware of right now.
- iv. I am a mere brain-in-a-vat (a BIV, for short) being electrochemically stimulated to have all these states of mind that I am now having.

Skeptics can make use of such hypotheses in constructing various arguments that challenge our pre-philosophical picture of ourselves as cognitively successful. Consider, for instance, the BIV hypothesis, and some ways in which this hypothesis can be employed in a skeptical argument.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ P. Unger, *Ignorance: A Case for Scepticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 100.

¹³⁵ M. Steup, Ernest Sosa (eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 117.

Here is one way of doing so. According to the BIV hypothesis, the experiences you would have as a BIV and the experiences you have as a normal person are perfectly alike, indistinguishable, so to speak, “from the inside”. Thus, although it appears to you as if you are a normally embodied human being, everything would appear exactly the same way to a BIV. Thus, the way things appear to you cannot provide you with knowledge that you are not a BIV. But if the way things appear to you cannot provide you with such knowledge, then nothing can give you such knowledge, and so you cannot know that you are not a BIV. Of course, you already know this much: if you are a BIV, then you do not have any hands. If you do not know that you are not a BIV, then you do not know that you are not in a situation in which you do not have any hands. But if you do not know that you are not in a situation in which you do not have any hands, then you do not know that you are not handless. And to not know that you are not handless is simply to not know that you have hands.¹³⁶ We can summarize this skeptical argument as follows:

9.4 The BIV-Knowledge Closure Argument

- (C1) I don’t know that I’m not a BIV.
- (C2) If I don’t know that I’m not a BIV, then I don’t know that I have hands.
- Therefore: (C3) I don’t know that I have hands.

As we have just seen, (C1) and (C2) are very plausible premises. It would seem, therefore, that the argument is sound. If it is, we must conclude we don’t know we have hands. But surely that conclusion cannot be right: if it turns out that I don’t know that I have hands, that must be because of something very peculiar about my cognitive relation to the issue of whether I have hands—not because of the completely anodyne considerations mentioned in the above argument. So we are confronted with a difficult challenge: The conclusion of the above argument seems plainly false, but on what grounds can we reject it?

Here are some other ways of using the BIV-knowledge closure argument hypothesis to generate a skeptical argument.

9.5 Responses to the Closure Argument

Next, we will examine various responses to this argument. According to the first, we can see that (C2) is false if we distinguish between relevant and irrelevant alternatives. An alternative to a proposition *p* is any proposition that is incompatible with *p*. Your having hands and your being a BIV are alternatives: if the former is true, the latter is false, and *vice versa*. According to the thought that motivates the second premise of the BIV argument, you know that you have hands only if you can discriminate between your actually having hands and the alternative of being a (handless) BIV. But, by hypothesis, you cannot discriminate between these. That is why you don’t know that you have hands.

¹³⁶*ibid.*

In response to such reasoning, a relevant alternatives theorist would say that your inability to discriminate between these two is not an obstacle to your knowing that you have hands, and that is because your being a BIV is *not* a *relevant* alternative to your having hands. What would be a relevant alternative? This, for example: your arms ending in stumps rather than hands, or your having hooks instead of hands, or your having prosthetic hands. But these alternatives do not prevent you from knowing that you have hands—not because they are irrelevant, but rather because you can discriminate between these alternatives and your having hands. The relevant alternative theorist holds, therefore, that you do know that you have hands: you know it because you can discriminate it from relevant alternatives, like your having stumps rather than hands.

Thus, according to Relevant Alternatives theorists, you know that you have hands even though you don't know that you are not a BIV. There are two chief problems for this approach. The first is that denouncing the BIV alternative as irrelevant is *ad hoc* unless it is supplemented with a principled account of what makes one alternative relevant and another irrelevant. The second is that premise 2 is highly plausible. To deny it is to allow that the following conjunction can be true:

9.5.1 Abominable Conjunction: I know that I have hands but I do not know that I am not a (handless) BIV.

Many epistemologists would agree that this conjunction is indeed abominable because it blatantly violates the basic and extremely plausible intuition that you cannot know you have hands without knowing that you are not a BIV.

Next, let us consider a response to this “Closure Argument” according to which it is not the second but the first premise that must be rejected. G. E. Moore has pointed out that an argument succeeds only to the extent that its premises are more plausible than the conclusion.¹³⁷ So if we encounter an argument whose conclusion we find much more implausible than the denial of the premises, then we can turn the argument on its head. According to this approach, we can respond to the BIV argument as follows:

9.6 Counter BIV

- (~C3) I know that I have hands.
- (C2) If I don't know that I'm not a BIV, then I don't know that I have hands.
- Therefore: (~C1) I know that I am not a BIV.

Unless we are skeptics or opponents of closure, we would have to concede that this argument is sound. It is valid, and its premises are true. Yet few philosophers would agree that Counter BIV amounts to a satisfying response to the BIV argument. It fails to explain *how* one can know that one is not a BIV. The observation that the premises of the BIV argument are less plausible than the denial of its conclusion does not help us understand how such knowledge is possible. That is

¹³⁷ G.E. Moore, “Proof of an External World”, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, (1959), 126.

why the Moorean response, unsupplemented with an account of how one can know that one is not a BIV, is widely thought to be an unsuccessful rebuttal of the Closure Argument.¹³⁸

We have looked at two responses to BIV-Knowledge Closure Argument. The relevant alternatives response implausibly denies the second premise. The Moorean response denies the first premise without explaining how we could possibly have the knowledge that the first premise claims we don't have. Another prominent response, contextualism, avoids both of these objections.

According to the contextualist, the precise contribution that the verb "to know" makes to the truth-conditions of the sentences in which it occurs varies from one context to another: in contexts in which the BIV hypothesis is under discussion, an agent counts as "knowing" a fact only if he can satisfy some extremely high (typically unachievable) epistemic feat, and this is why (1) is true. But in contexts in which the BIV hypothesis is not under discussion, an agent can count as "knowing" a fact even if his epistemic position vis-à-vis that fact is much more modest, and this is why (3), taken in isolation, appears false.

The contextualist literature has grown vastly over the past two decades: different contextualists have different accounts of how features of context affect the meaning of some occurrence of the verb "to know", and each proposal has encountered specific challenges concerning the semantic mechanisms that it posits, and the extent to which it explains the whole range of facts about which epistemic claims are plausible under which conditions.¹³⁹

9.7 The BIV-Justification Under-determination Argument

- (U1) The way things appear to me could be equally well explained by the BIV-knowledge closure argument hypothesis as by my ordinary beliefs that things appear to me the way they do because I perceive mind-independent objects.
- (U2) If the way things appear to me could be equally well explained by either of two hypotheses, then I am not justified in believing one of those hypotheses rather than the other.
- Therefore: (U3) I am not justified in believing that I perceive mind-independent objects.

9.8 Responses to the Underdetermination Argument

Both the contextualist and the Moorean responses, as discussed in the previous section, leave out one important detail. Both say that one can know that one is not a BIV (though contextualists grant this point only for the sense of "know" operational in low-standards contexts), but neither view explains *how* one can know such a thing. If, by hypothesis, a BIV has all the same states of mind that I have—including all the same perceptual experiences—then how can I be justified in

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Cf. S. Cohen, "Basic Knowledge and the Problem of Easy Knowledge", 310.

believing that I am not a BIV? And if I cannot be justified in believing that I am not a BIV, then how can I know that I am not?

Of course, the question about how I can be justified in believing that I am not a BIV is not especially hard for externalists to answer. From the point of view of an externalist, the fact that you and the BIV have the very same states of mind need not be at all relevant to the issue of whether you are justified in believing that you are not a BIV, since such justification is not fully determined by those mental states anyway.

The philosophers who have had to do considerable work to answer the question how I can be justified in believing that I am not a BIV have typically done this work in reply to Underdetermination Argument.

What might justify your belief that you are not a BIV? According to some philosophers, you are justified in believing that you are not a BIV because, for instance, you know perfectly well that current technology does not enable anyone to create a BIV. The proponent of the BIV hypothesis might regard this answer as no better than the Moorean response in the previous section: if you are allowed to appeal to (what you regard as your) knowledge of current technology to justify your belief that you are not a BIV, then why can't the Moorean equally well rely on his knowledge that he has hands to justify his belief that he's not a BIV?

Philosophers who accept this objection, but who do not want to ground your justification for believing that you are not a BIV in purely externalistic factors, may instead claim that your belief is justified by the fact that your own beliefs about the external world provide a better explanation of your sense experiences than does the BIV hypothesis.¹⁴⁰

9.9 The BIV-Knowledge Defeasibility Argument

- (D1) If I know that I have hands, then I know that any evidence indicating that I don't have hands is misleading evidence.
- (D2) If I know that some evidence is misleading, then I know that I should disregard that evidence.
- Therefore: (D3) If I know that I have hands, then I know that I should disregard any evidence to the contrary.
- (D4) I do not know that I should disregard any evidence to the contrary.
- Therefore: (D5) I do not know that I have hands.

9.10 Responses to the Defeasibility Argument

The most influential reply to this argument is to say that, when I acquire evidence that I don't have hands, such evidence makes me cease to know that I have hands. On this view, when I acquire such evidence, the argument above is sound. But prior to my acquiring such evidence,

¹⁴⁰ B. Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (London: Williams & Norgate).

(4) is false, and so the argument above is not sound. Thus, the truth of (4), and consequently the soundness of this argument, depends on whether or not I have evidence that I don't have hands. If I do have such evidence, then the argument is sound, but of course it has no general skeptical implications: all it shows is that I cannot know some fact whenever I have evidence that the fact does not obtain.¹⁴¹

Plausible as this reply has seemed to most philosophers, it has been effectively challenged by Lasonen-Aarnio (2014b).¹⁴² Her argument is this: presumably, it is possible to have *more than enough* evidence to know some fact. But if it is possible to have more than enough evidence to know some fact, it follows that one might still know that fact even if one acquires some slight evidence against it. And yet, it would be wrong to leave one's confidence entirely unaffected by the slight evidence that one acquires against that fact: though the evidence might be too slight to destroy one's knowledge, it cannot be too slight to diminish one's confidence even slightly. So long as one could continue to know a fact while rationally diminishing one's confidence in it in response to new evidence, the most popular reply to the defeasibility argument fails.

Other replies to the defeasibility argument include the denial of premise (2),¹⁴³ the denial of (4),¹⁴⁴ and the claim that the context-sensitivity of "knows" means that (4) is true only relative to contexts in which the possibility of future defeaters is relevant.¹⁴⁵ But neither of these replies has yet received widespread assent.

9.11 The BIV-Epistemic Possibility Argument

- P1) It is at least possible that I am a BIV.
- (P2) If it is possible that I am a BIV, then it is possible that I don't have hands.
- (P3) If it is possible that I don't have hands, then I don't know that I have hands.
- Therefore: (P4) I don't know that I have hands.

Obviously, this list of skeptical arguments could be extended by varying either (a) the skeptical hypothesis employed, or (b) the kind of cognitive success being challenged, or (c) the epistemological principles that link the hypothesis in (a) and the challenge in (b). Some of the resulting skeptical arguments are more plausible than others, and some are historically more prominent than others, but we cannot undertake a comprehensive survey here.

9.12 Responses to the Epistemic Possibility Argument

The most common reply to this argument is either to deny premise (1), or to deny that we are justified in believing that premise (1) is true. Most writers would deny premise (1), and would do

¹⁴¹ G. Harman, *Change in View*, 3.

¹⁴² M. Lasonen-Aarnio, "Higher-Order Evidence and the Limits of Defeat", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 88(2), (2014a), 317.

¹⁴³ Ibid

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ R. Neta, "S Knows That P", *Noûs*, 36(4), (2002), 663.

so on whatever grounds they have for thinking that I can know that I am not a BIV: knowing that something is not the case excludes that thing's being epistemically possible for you.¹⁴⁶

But a couple of influential writers—most notably Rogers Albritton and Thompson Clarke¹⁴⁷ — do not claim that premise (1) is false. Rather, they deny that we are justified in believing that premise (1) is true. According to these writers, what normally justifies us in believing that something or other is epistemically possible is that we can conceive of *discovering* that it is true. For instance, what justifies me in believing, say, that it is possible that Mohammad Buhari has resigned is that *I can clearly conceive of discovering* that he has resigned. But if I attempt to conceive of discovering that I am a BIV, it is not clear that I can succeed in this attempt. I may conceive of coming upon some evidence that I am a BIV—but, insofar as this evidence tells in favor of the hypothesis that I am a BIV, does it not also undermine its own credibility?

In such a case, is there anything at all that would count as “my evidence”? Without being able to answer this question in the affirmative, it is not clear that I can conceive of anything that would amount to discovering that I am a BIV. Of course, from the fact that I cannot conceive of anything that would amount to discovering that I am a BIV, it does not follow that I am not a BIV—and so it does not even follow that it is not possible that I am a BIV. But, whether or not it *is* possible that I am a BIV, I cannot be justified in thinking that it is. And that is to say that I cannot be justified in accepting premise (1) of this argument.

¹⁴⁶ See K. DeRose, “Epistemic Possibilities”, *The Philosophical Review*, 100(4), (1991), 581–605, for an influential account of epistemic possibility that entails this view.

¹⁴⁷ R. Albritton, “On a Form of Skeptical Argument from Possibility”, *Philosophical Issues*, (2011), 21; and T. Clarke, “The Legacy of Skepticism”, *The Journal of Philosophy*, 69(20), (1972), 754–769.