

## Scepticism

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### Philosophical Concept

Simply put, scepticism is the view that we fail to know anything. More generally, the term 'scepticism' refers to a family of views, each of which denies that some term of positive epistemic appraisal applies to our beliefs. Thus, sceptical doctrines might hold that none of our beliefs is certain, that none of our beliefs is justified, that none of our beliefs is reasonable, that none of our beliefs is more reasonable than its denial, and so on. Sceptical doctrines can also vary with respect to the kind of belief they target. Scepticism can be restricted to beliefs produced in certain ways: for example, scepticism concerning beliefs based on memory, on inductive reasoning or even on any reasoning whatsoever. And sceptical views can be restricted to beliefs about certain subjects: for example, scepticism concerning beliefs about the external world, beliefs about other minds, beliefs about value and so on. Solipsism – the view that all that exists is the self and its states – can be seen as a form of scepticism based on the claim that there are no convincing arguments for the existence of anything beyond the self.

The philosophical problem of scepticism derives from what appear to be very strong arguments for sceptical conclusions. Since most philosophers are unwilling to accept those conclusions, there is a problem concerning how to respond to the arguments. For example, one kind of sceptical argument attempts to show that we have no knowledge of the world around us. The argument hinges on the claim that we are not in a position to rule out the possibility that we are brains-in-a-vat being artificially stimulated to have just the sensory experience we are actually having. We have no basis for ruling out this possibility since if it were actual, our experience would not change in any way. The sceptic then claims that if we cannot rule out the possibility that we are brains-in-a-vat, then we cannot know anything about the world around us.

Responses to this argument often fall into one of two categories. Some philosophers argue that we can rule out the possibility that we are brains-in-a-vat. Others argue that we do not need to be able to rule out this possibility in order to have knowledge of the world around us.

### 1. The philosophical problem of scepticism

Most contemporary discussions of scepticism have focused on scepticism concerning the external world. We can use this type of scepticism to illustrate the broader philosophical problem, as many of the arguments we consider can be applied *mutatis mutandis* to other types of scepticism.

One type of scepticism denies that we know anything about the external world. The view is not simply that, for example, by gathering more evidence we could come to know. Rather, it is that we are unable to attain knowledge. On the plausible assumption that knowledge entails justified belief, scepticism concerning knowledge follows from scepticism concerning justified belief – the view that justified belief about the external world is unattainable.

Scepticism is of philosophical interest because there appear to be very strong arguments that support it. This presents us with the problem of how to respond to these arguments. One way would be to accept their conclusion. Of course, very few philosophers are willing to do this. There are very few actual sceptics. So the problem of scepticism is how to refute or in some way neutralize or deflate the force of these arguments.

In the history of philosophy, some sceptical arguments have been based on the unreliability or relativity of our senses (see Pyrrhonism), or upon the inability of reason to produce non-question begging arguments for our beliefs (see Hume, D. §2). Nearly all sceptical arguments exploit sceptical hypotheses or alternatives. Sceptical alternatives suppose that the world is very different from what we would normally believe on the basis of our sensory evidence. This entails that our sensory evidence is radically misleading. More precisely, suppose we claim to know a proposition  $q$  on the basis of evidence  $e$ . Let (proposition)  $h$  be an *alternative* to  $q$  just in case  $h$  is incompatible with  $q$  ( $q$  and  $h$  cannot both be true). Then  $h$  is a *sceptical alternative* to  $q$  provided  $h$  is an alternative to  $q$  compatible with  $e$ . An alternative of this kind has sceptical force precisely because it is compatible with the evidence we claim gives us knowledge of  $q$ . For example, ordinarily, I would claim to know on the basis of my visual evidence that I am currently looking at my computer monitor. One sceptical alternative, introduced by Descartes (1641), is that the world of familiar objects does not exist and that I am being deceived into thinking it does by a powerful demon. The demon causes me to have just the sensory experiences I would have if the world of familiar objects existed (see Descartes, R. §4). According to a modern version of this alternative, I am a brain-in-a-vat being artificially stimulated to have all the experiences I would have if I had a body and interacted, in the normal way, with the world of familiar objects. These alternatives are incompatible with what I claim to know about the familiar world around me since according to those alternatives, that world does not exist. Moreover, since these alternatives entail that it appears to me as if that world exists, they are compatible with my evidence.

Sceptical alternatives provide the basis for very powerful sceptical arguments. Exactly how they do this is a matter of some controversy. The quickest route to scepticism is through what I will call the entailment principle:

- $S$  knows  $q$  on the basis of (evidence)  $e$  only if  $e$  entails  $q$

Since a sceptical alternative is, by definition, a proposition incompatible with  $q$  but compatible with  $e$ , it follows from the mere existence of sceptical alternatives of the kind we have been considering that we do not know those empirical propositions we ordinarily claim to know. But, this argument is only as good as the entailment principle. Should we accept this principle? In effect, the principle says I can know  $p$  only if my evidence precludes the possibility of error. Though many philosophers concede that this principle has considerable intuitive force, most have thought, in the end, that it should be rejected. This position is sometimes called fallibilism (see Commonsensism §§1–2; Fallibilism). Of course, few philosophers believe that scepticism should be avoided at all costs. But when given a choice between scepticism and fallibilism, most philosophers opt for fallibilism (at the expense of the entailment principle).

Does fallibilism beg the question against scepticism? After all, precisely what the sceptic claims is that the existence of alternatives consistent with our evidence undermines our claims to know. Fallibilists merely respond that the alternatives the sceptic has invoked do not undermine our knowledge claims: that is, we can know even when there are such alternatives. Since this is the point at issue, fallibilists seem to need an argument in support of this crucial claim. Here, fallibilists can appeal to our strong intuition that in many cases we do know things, despite the existence of sceptical alternatives. And it is not clear that the sceptic can undermine those intuitions except by appealing to the entailment principle – which is itself undermined by those very intuitions. Thus neither side of the debate may be able to defend its position without begging the question.

Unfortunately scepticism is not so easily dispatched. The sceptic can turn the appeal to our ordinary intuitions against fallibilism. For some of those intuitions can provide the basis for a new sceptical argument. This argument begins by claiming, quite plausibly, that whatever else we may say about the significance of sceptical alternatives, we cannot claim, plausibly, to know they are false. For example, we cannot claim, plausibly, to know that we are not brains-in-a-vat being artificially stimulated to have exactly the same experience we would have as normal human beings. None of our evidence counts against this hypothesis since if it were true, we would have precisely that evidence.

But how, exactly, does this permit the sceptic to conclude we do not know the propositions we ordinarily claim to know? At this point, the sceptic appeals to a very intuitive principle that is weaker than the entailment principle. This principle says that the set of known (by  $S$ ) propositions is closed under known (by  $S$ ) entailment:

- If  $S$  knows  $q$ , and  $S$  knows that  $q$  entails not- $h$ , then  $S$  knows not- $h$

While one could quibble with some details about this principle, it (or something very much like it) seems compelling (see Deductive closure principle). From this principle and the claim that we fail to know sceptical alternatives are false, it follows that we fail to know the propositions we ordinarily claim to know (since we know those propositions entail the falsity of sceptical alternatives).

## 2. Responses to scepticism

This argument presents problems for fallibilism, as I have characterized it, since the argument at no point presupposes the entailment principle. The sceptical argument we are now considering merely exploits the fallibilist position that permits the existence of alternatives to known propositions.

Fallibilist responses come in two forms, each of which corresponds to the denial of one of the two premises of the sceptical argument. One response denies the closure principle. For example, Dretske (1970) has argued that the fact that we do not know the falsity of sceptical alternatives shows that the closure principle is false, since we do know the truth of many empirical propositions that (we know) entail the falsity of sceptical alternatives. According to this view, certain alternatives are not relevant to whether one knows a proposition: one does not have to know such an alternative to  $q$  is false in order to know  $q$ . So, for example, one can know that one sees a zebra without knowing that the alternative – that one sees a cleverly disguised mule – is false, because that alternative is not relevant. This version of fallibilism is sometimes called the ‘relevant alternatives’ view.

The other fallibilist response to the sceptical argument agrees with the sceptic that the closure principle is true. But, against the sceptic, these fallibilists deny the claim that we fail to know the falsity of sceptical alternatives. One version of this fallibilist response uses the closure principle along with the claim that we do have knowledge, to reject the claim that we do not know that sceptical alternatives are false. They argue from the premise that we know some ordinary proposition  $q$  and the premise that if we know  $q$  then we know any proposition that we know is entailed by  $q$  (the closure principle), to the conclusion that we know that we are not seeing a cleverly disguised mule. We can call this view ‘*modus ponens* fallibilism’.

## 3. Relevant alternatives fallibilism

As we have noted, the sceptic attempts to undermine our claims to know by calling attention to sceptical alternatives. The relevant alternatives response to this sceptical manoeuvre is to deny that these alternatives are relevant. An alternative,  $h$ , to  $q$ , is relevant just in case we need to know  $h$  is false in order to know  $q$ . So if  $h$  is not a relevant alternative, we can still know  $q$  even if we fail to know  $h$  is false. This view entails that the deductive closure principle is false.

There are two ways to argue for this view. The direct way is to cite alleged counterexamples to the deductive closure principle. Some philosophers have done this by appealing both to our

intuition that we know many propositions about the external world and to our intuition that we fail to know the falsity of sceptical alternatives. So my strong intuition that I know I am looking at my computer monitor and my strong intuition that I fail to know I am not a brain-in-a-vat constitute the basis for such a counterexample.

A more indirect way to argue for this view is to construct a theory of knowledge that has as a consequence, the failure of the closure principle, as in Nozick (1981). The basic idea of these kinds of theories is that knowing requires the truth of certain subjunctive conditionals. On one (simplified) version, my knowing  $q$  requires that:

- (S) If  $q$  were false, I would not believe  $q$

This requirement for knowledge precludes my knowing I am not a brain-in-a-vat. For I would still believe I am not a brain-in-a-vat, even if I were a brain-in-a-vat. But, this requirement allows me to know I see a computer monitor. For it seems plausible to claim that I would not believe I see the computer monitor if I were not seeing it.

A significant difficulty for the direct way of arguing for the relevant alternatives view – the appeal to counterexamples to the closure principle – is that the intuitions that support the counterexamples seem no more compelling than the intuitions in favour of the closure principle. Many think that the closure principle expresses a fundamental truth about our concept of knowledge. So much so that if a certain theory of knowledge entails the falsity of the closure principle, some philosophers are inclined to take the fact as a *reductio ad absurdum* of that theory.

But this presents problems for the indirect way of arguing for the relevant alternatives view: some philosophers reject theories that endorse condition (S), for the very reason that it entails the falsity of the closure principle. Moreover, there are other difficulties for theories that endorse conditions like (S). One problem for these theories is that they seem to preclude our knowing much of what we take ourselves to know inductively. Consider an example where you leave a glass containing some ice cubes outside on an extremely hot day (Vogel 1987). Several hours later, while you are still inside escaping the heat, you remember the glass you left outside. You infer that the ice must have melted by now. Here we have an ordinary case of knowledge by inductive inference. According to the theories we are now considering, my knowing that the ice cubes have melted requires the truth of this subjunctive conditional:

- (S') If the ice cubes had not melted, I would not believe that they had

But (S') looks false. It seems plausible to claim that had the ice cubes not melted, it might have been for some reason (for example, someone putting them in a styrofoam cooler) that would still

leave me believing they had melted. Thus, it looks as if theories which endorse this condition are too strong. If this is correct, then the anti-sceptical results afforded by condition (S) come at the cost of scepticism about certain kinds of inductive knowledge.

We should note, however, that there is some controversy over the evaluation of subjunctive conditionals like (S'). But I think it is fair to say that standard semantics for subjunctive conditionals would render (S') as false (see Deductive closure principle §§2–3).

#### 4. *Modus ponens* fallibilism

*Modus ponens* fallibilists accept, along with the sceptic, the deductive closure principle. But they attempt to turn that principle against the sceptic. Like relevant alternatives fallibilists, they take as a starting point the strongly intuitive claim that we do know many things about the world. They then note that, given the closure principle, it follows that we know the falsity of sceptical alternatives. For example, I now know that I am looking at my computer monitor. I also know that my looking at a computer monitor precludes my being a brain-in-a-vat. It follows by the closure principle that I know I am not a brain-in-a-vat.

Is this piece of reasoning legitimate? One might challenge those who reason in this way to explain how we know sceptical alternatives are false. How, for example, do I know I am not a brain-in-a-vat? After all, the sceptical problem arises because we seem to lack any reason for believing sceptical alternatives are false. These alternatives are constructed so as to make it impossible for our evidence to count against them. Presumably, our recognition of this explains, at least in part, our intuition that we fail to know sceptical alternatives are false.

One way for the *modus ponens* fallibilist to try to meet this challenge is to claim that I can know:

- not-*h*: I am not a brain-in-a-vat

by inferring it from:

- *q*: I am looking at my computer monitor

According to this way of proceeding, even though none of my evidence for *q* counts in favour of not-*h*, it does not follow that I have no reason to believe not-*h*. For that reason can be *q* itself. Since I know *q* (on the basis of my visual evidence) and I know that *q* entails not-*h*, I can infer not-*h* from *q* and thereby come to know not-*h*.

Is this reasoning legitimate? Let's compare it with another case. Suppose I park my car in front of the market and go inside. Although I am not currently looking out the window I can still know:

- *p*: My car is parked in front of the store

Can I then come to know:

- *r*: My car has not been towed away

simply by inferring it from  $p$ ? Notice that  $p$  entails  $r$ . It seems, none the less, that I would already need to have sufficient evidence to know  $r$  before I could infer  $p$ . And if my initial evidence is insufficient for me to know  $r$ , I cannot infer  $p$  and so I cannot infer  $r$  from  $p$ .

The *modus ponens* fallibilist reasoning concerning sceptical alternatives looks suspicious because it seems like the reasoning in the parked car case. Intuitively, I need to have reason to believe not- $h$  before I can infer (and thereby come to know)  $q$ . Thus I cannot first infer  $q$  and then go on to infer (and thereby come to know) non- $h$ .

Another version of fallibilism argues for the claim that we know sceptical alternatives are false by appealing to principles of inductive inference. One version of this view argues that the hypothesis that the familiar world of objects exists is the best explanation of our sensory evidence (and so a better explanation than sceptical alternatives). This licenses an inference from our sensory evidence to the familiar-world hypothesis (see Inference to the best explanation). We can thereby come to know that this familiar world exists. And since we know that the familiar-world hypothesis rules out the sceptical alternatives, it follows by the closure principle that we know sceptical alternatives are false.

The burden for this view is to say why the familiar-world hypothesis is a better explanation of our sensory evidence than any sceptical alternative. This is not easy to do since sceptical alternatives are designed to explain our sensory evidence. Proponents of the view that sceptical alternatives provide inferior explanations often appeal to pragmatic considerations like simplicity and conservatism. But there are several problems with this approach. Even if we could establish that the familiar-world hypothesis is, for example, simpler than any sceptical alternative, why should we think that this supports the claim that the hypothesis is true? Unless this crucial link can be made, it is not clear how this response to the sceptic can succeed (see Theoretical (epistemic) virtues).

Moreover, often arguments that the familiar-world hypothesis is the best explanation of our sensory data are quite sophisticated and complex. This raises the worry that only those who are philosophically sophisticated enough to follow such an argument can have knowledge of the external world.

## **5. The role of intuitions**

Many fallibilist responses to the sceptic take as their starting point our ordinary intuitions about knowledge or our everyday pattern of knowledge attributions. But how exactly can our everyday pattern of knowledge attributions have force against sceptical arguments, since the sceptic is calling into question precisely these attributions?

The reason our ordinary intuitions about knowledge have force against the sceptic is that these intuitions persist even in the face of sceptical arguments. When we confront a sceptical argument, even though we may not be able to say where the argument goes wrong, we are reluctant to withdraw our everyday knowledge attributions. This is the basis of G.E. Moore's famous response to sceptical arguments. Moore claimed to be more sure that he knew some things, for example, that he has a hand, than he is that the sceptical argument is sound. So even though he could not say where the sceptical argument goes wrong, he thought it more rational to suppose that there is a mistake in the sceptical argument than to suppose that the conclusion of the argument – we fail to know anything – is true (see Moore, G.E. §3; Commonsensism). The sceptic could try to dismiss the significance of our reluctance to withdraw our everyday knowledge attributions as nothing more than the persistence of old habits. This persistence of our habitual ways of thinking about knowledge even after we have been confronted with sceptical arguments was noticed by Descartes and by Hume.

But in response, we can note that, often, we find our everyday pattern of knowledge attributions compelling even while we are in the midst of sincere philosophical reflection. The fact is that when we think about sceptical arguments, we often find ourselves pulled in two directions. We feel the pull of the sceptical argument and yet we remain reluctant to give up our claims to know. This phenomenon cannot be dismissed as nothing more than an unreflective habit. So the fallibilist can maintain that our everyday knowledge attributions reflect deep-seated intuitions about our concept of knowledge. Since our intuitions are a kind of data that any theory of knowledge must explain, they present a formidable challenge to the sceptical position. Nevertheless, there is something unsatisfying about rejecting scepticism just because it conflicts with our intuitions about knowledge. For, again, it is hard to deny the force of the sceptical argument. And just as our intuitions about our everyday knowledge attributions present a problem for scepticism, so our sceptical intuitions present a challenge to our everyday knowledge attributions. If scepticism is a strongly counterintuitive view, then why do sceptical arguments have any grip on us at all? Why do we not immediately respond to sceptical arguments by objecting, for example, that sceptical hypotheses are too remote and fanciful to undermine our knowledge claims? (Either we can know that sceptical alternatives are false or we need not know they are false in order to know things about the external world.) Sometimes we are inclined to do just that. But the sceptical problem arises precisely because we cannot always sustain that attitude. Sometimes, when we consider sceptical arguments, we begin to worry that sceptical alternatives really do threaten our knowledge claims.

What we are confronting here is a paradox – a set of inconsistent propositions, each of which has considerable independent plausibility:

1. We know some ordinary empirical propositions.
2. We do not know that sceptical alternatives are false.
3. If  $S$  knows  $q$ , and  $S$  knows that  $q$  entails not- $h$ , then  $S$  knows not- $h$ .



One of these propositions must be false (on the assumption that we know  $q$  entails not- $h$ ). Yet each of them is very difficult to deny. This is what explains our vacillation over scepticism. The arguments for scepticism and for fallibilism attempt to exploit the intuitions favourable to them. The sceptic appeals to (2) and (3), and concludes that (1) is false. Relevant alternatives fallibilism appeals to (1) and (2), and concludes that (3) is false. *Modus ponens* fallibilism appeals to (1) and (3), and concludes that (2) is false. Because each member of the set has independent plausibility, it seems arbitrary and unsatisfying to appeal to any two members of this triad as an argument against the third. Such a strategy does not provide what any successful resolution of a paradox should provide, namely an explanation of how the paradox arises in the first place. Any satisfying resolution of the paradox that defends our claims to know against the sceptic must explain the appeal of sceptical arguments. For it is that very appeal that gives rise to the paradox.

This is where Moore's response to the sceptic goes wrong. Many philosophers think that Moore begged the question against scepticism. In a way he did, but no more so than the sceptic begs the question against him. Still, there is something quite unsatisfying, philosophically, about Moore's treatment of the sceptical argument. But the problem with it is not that it begs the question against the sceptic. Rather the problem is that it fails to explain the dialectic force of sceptical arguments. Though it is possible that the apparent cogency of sceptical arguments is explained by some very subtle error in our reasoning, the simplicity of these arguments suggests that their appeal reveals something deep and important about our concept of knowledge. That is why we can learn much about the nature of knowledge by grappling with the problem of scepticism.

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