

General Philosophy: Scepticism

The sceptical argument

How do you know that you're not in the Matrix? Or that you're not a brain in a vat ('BIV'), hooked up to a machine which gives you all your everyday sensory impressions (including the impression of having a body)? Or that you're not being deceived by an evil demon to have all your sensory impressions, while actually you're somewhere else entirely—perhaps even without your body as you know it!¹

The natural answer to these questions is: *you don't*. The reason is that everything would look and feel and taste and smell and sound the same if (a) the world were as it appears, versus (b) the world were as described by one of these so-called *sceptical hypotheses*.²

Now: if I don't know that I'm not a BIV (say—focussing on the second of the above three sceptical scenarios in what follows), it surely follows (the thought goes) that I don't know that I have hands—because such a BIV would not have hands, and I don't know that I'm not a BIV! What goes for my having hands goes for all everyday propositions—so it seems that all such everyday knowledge can be called into question. This is a version of the *sceptical argument*, which is supposed to undermine all our everyday knowledge claims.

Being good philosophers, we can formalise the sceptical argument in the following logically valid, general way:

P1: I do not know that not-*H*.

P2: If I do not know that not-*H*, then I do not know that *O*. ('Closure premise'.)

C: Therefore, I do not know that *O*. (By *modus ponens*, from **P1** and **P2**.)

¹This last question is from Descartes' *Meditations*; the first and second questions are more contemporary variations on the same theme.

²This is an example of what philosophers of science call 'strong underdetermination of theory by evidence'—see e.g. Ladyman, *Understanding Philosophy of Science*, for more details.

Here, H is any sceptical hypothesis (e.g., 'I am a BIV.'), and O is any everyday proposition (e.g., 'I have hands'.)

Since this argument is logically valid, if I want to resist the conclusion that I don't know all of the things which I ordinarily take myself to know, then I must deny (at least one of!) the premises. We'll see that this affords a good way of categorising different responses to the sceptical argument which have been articulated in the philosophical literature.

Academic and Pyrrhonian scepticism

Before we begin to consider these different responses to the sceptical argument, it will be useful to give a little more background on scepticism in general, by distinguishing two different forms of philosophical scepticism:

Academic scepticism: Argue that knowledge is impossible. (Began with Plato.)

Pyrrhonian scepticism: Suspend all judgement on all questions, including the question of the possibility of knowledge.

The above sceptical argument is a version of academic scepticism. The meta-question, "How can you be so certain that knowledge is impossible?" pushed ancient philosophers to Pyrrhonian scepticism. But, in the remainder of this topic, we'll focus on academic scepticism only.

Moorean responses

Moore insists that I *do* know that I have hands. He thus straightforwardly denies the conclusion **C** of the sceptical argument, and with it **P1**: I *just know* that I have hands (for, he argues, "here is one hand, and here is another"), so I *just know* that I am not a

(handless, bodyless!) BIV!³

This response is technically fine, but to most people it's an unsatisfying case of begging the question, or table-thumping. What we'd like to see is an *argument* that I have hands—rather than just insisting from the outset (as the Moorean does) that this is the case!⁴

In light of this, we should move on, to consideration of other responses to the sceptical argument. Before we do so, though, we should note that something like the Moorean response was also offered in more ancient times, by Al-Ghazali, the medieval Sunni Islam philosopher:

This malady was mysterious and it lasted for nearly two months. During that time I was a skeptic in fact, but not in utterance and doctrine. At length God Most High cured me of that sickness. My soul regained its health and equilibrium and once again I accepted the self-evident data of reason and relied on them with safety and certainty. But that was not achieved by constructing a proof or putting together an argument. On the contrary, it was the effect of a light which God Most High cast into my breast. And that light is the key to most knowledge. (DE, §15.)

Al-Ghazali is also denying **P1** of the sceptical argument—by saying that God *immediately reveals* to him that he *does* have hands, and that (speaking anachronistically) he's *not* a BIV. Insofar as they both deny **P1** on the grounds that we *immediately know* that it's false, both Moore and Al-Ghazali can be understood, in modern philosophical parlance, as embracing *dogmatism* as a response to the sceptical argument. Others deny **P1** for different reasons, and so are not correctly categorised as dogmatists—see e.g. Putnam's response below.⁵

³This is an instance of 'One person's *modus ponens* is another person's *modus tollens*', for while the (academic) sceptic argues ' $P, P \rightarrow Q \therefore Q$ ', the Moorean argues ' $P \rightarrow Q, \neg Q \therefore \neg P$ '.

⁴As you'll see, Naci doesn't have much time for the Moorean response!

⁵And also the responses offered by so-called 'safety theorists', but I won't discuss these here.

Semantic responses

Putnam (1981) offers a much more sophisticated means of denying **P1** of the sceptical argument, based upon certain linguistic and semantic considerations. Here's how his response goes. Suppose that you've always been a BIV. Suppose that you utter the word 'hand'. To what are you referring? A real-world hand, or a BIV-hand-*image*? Putnam argues that, since you've always been a BIV, you've never had any direct access to real-world hands, so the latter is much more plausible (you've only ever had direct access to BIV-hand-images). Drawing on these observations, Putnam makes the following disjunctive argument to the effect that, whether one is a BIV or not, one's utterance of 'I am a BIV' will invariably be false—in which case, the sceptical concern that I can't know that I'm *not* a BIV is (he claims) abated:

- p1:** Either I am a BIV (speaking vat-English) or I am a non-BIV (speaking English).
- p2:** If I am a BIV (speaking vat-English), then my utterances of 'I am a BIV' are true
iff I have sense impressions as of being a BIV.
- p3:** If I am a BIV (speaking vat-English), then I do not have sense impressions as of
being a BIV.
- c1:** If I am a BIV (speaking vat English), then my utterances of 'I am a BIV' are false.
(By **p2**, **p3**.)
- p4:** If I am a non-BIV (speaking English), then my utterances of 'I am a BIV' are true
iff I am a BIV.
- c2:** If I am a non-BIV (speaking English), then my utterances of 'I am a BIV' are false.
(By **p4**.)
- c3:** My utterances of 'I am a BIV' are false. (By **p1**, **c1**, **c2**.)
- p5:** My utterances of 'I am a BIV' are false iff I am not a BIV. ('Disquotation principle'.)
- c:** I am not a BIV. (By **c3**, **p5**.)

If, regardless of the outcome, I'm not a BIV, then of course I *know* that I'm not a BIV. So, for Putnam,⁶ **P1** of the sceptical argument is false—which gives Putnam the leeway he needs to also deny the conclusion of the sceptical argument, **C**.

There's a rich literature responding to Putnam's argument.⁷ Here are three particular worries which one might have about it:

1. What about cases of *recent envattings*, in which someone wasn't a BIV their whole life? Such people would, even as BIVs, be able to refer to not just BIV-images, but to *actual* BIVs. In which case, **p2** of Putnam's argument is false.
2. Isn't the disquotation principle **p5** suspect? The foregoing parts of the argument show that my utterances of 'I am not a BIV' could be false *even when I am a BIV*—which conflicts with **p5**.
3. Does Putnam's semantic externalism, according to which the meanings of our words are a function of our external environments (in this case, are a function of whether we're in fact BIVs) lead to general scepticism about the meanings of our terms? So have we just traded one form of scepticism for another here?

Denying closure

All of the foregoing has dealt with responses to the sceptical argument which deny **P1**. Let's now move on to consider responses which deny **P2**. Nozick offers a *modal* definition of knowledge,⁸ and uses this to address the sceptical argument by arguing that, given this definition of knowledge, **P2** is false. Here, first, is Nozick's definition of knowledge:

A subject *S* knows a proposition *P* iff:⁹

⁶And for much more sophisticated reasons than Moore!

⁷There's a nice discussion of Putnam in Thomas Nagel's *The View from Nowhere*; see also the SEP article, *Skepticism and Content Externalism*.

⁸'Modal' in the sense that it involves counterfactual reasoning—see below.

⁹There's also a fourth condition in Nozick's definition of knowledge, but it isn't important for us here, so I omit it. (It's introduced mostly for 'symmetry reasons'.) See his paper for details.

1. P is true.
2. S believes that P .
3. If P were false, S would not believe that P .

The idea is that one knows that P iff one's belief that P correctly 'tracks the truth' that P . This issues the intuitively correct verdict on Gettier cases: Smith does not know that the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket, for if the man who gets the job (Smith) were to have a different number of coins in his pocket, Smith would still believe that the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket (because Smith thinks that Jones will get the job, and saw Jones put ten coins into his—i.e. Jones'—pocket). People who endorse Nozick's definition of knowledge are known as 'sensitivity theorists'.

How are we to understand condition (3) in Nozick's definition of knowledge? Here's a canonical and precise way of cashing it out in terms of possible worlds: *In the closest world in which P is false, S does not believe that P .*

Now, with all of this background on Nozick's definition of knowledge in hand, we can think about how he uses this in order to respond to the sceptical hypothesis. First ask the question: does my belief that I have hands (' O ') track the truth of my having hands? Answer: *yes*, because in the closest world in which I do *not* have hands (presumably some world in which everything is basically as it is in this world, except that, say, I've lost my hands in some unfortunate accident), I *do not believe* that I have hands (I just look and see that I don't have hands). Thus, for Nozick, the conclusion **C** of the sceptical argument is false.

Now ask the question: does my belief that I'm not a BIV (supposing that I actually am not a BIV) track the truth of my not being a BIV? In this case, the answer is *no*—for in the closest BIV-world (i.e., world in which I indeed am a BIV—NB: a much more remote world than the above-mentioned world in which I've lost my hands), *I would still believe that I am not a BIV*. So, for Nozick, my belief that I'm not a BIV doesn't track the truth of my not being a BIV, so I *do not know* that I'm not a BIV, and **P1** of the sceptical argument is *true*.

Since the sceptical argument is logically valid, if Nozick is saying that **C** is false and that **P1** is true, he *must* be saying that **P2** of the sceptical argument is false. And indeed he does say this! He denies this premise: the so-called ‘closure premise’: he thinks that I can know that I have hands, without knowing that I’m not a BIV.

Some, e.g. DeRose, don’t find this acceptable or plausible—they call it a ‘fumbling of the second premise’. There are also other issues with sensitivity theory (e.g. Kripke’s notorious ‘variant fake barns’ examples¹⁰), but I won’t discuss these here.

References

- [1] René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*. **Meditation 1**.
- [2] Al-Ghazali, *Deliverances from Error*. §§**1-20**.
- [3] Jennifer Nagel, *Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. **Ch. 2**.
- [4] G. E. Moore, “Proof of an External World”, *Proceedings of the British Academy* 25, pp. 273-300, 1939.
- [5] Robert Nozick, “Knowledge and Scepticism”, in his *Philosophical Explanations*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 167-185, 1981.
- [6] Hilary Putnam, “Brains in a Vat”, in his *Reason, Truth and History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

¹⁰See the SEP article *Analyses of Knowledge* for the details.