

PHIL 2606: Knowledge, Reason and Action

Lecture 2: Can we have Knowledge?

1. One can be skeptical about all sorts of things. We are interested in skepticism about how much we *know*.
2. As philosophers, we are interested in skeptical *arguments* – arguments which have a skeptical conclusion.
3. A skeptical argument:

P₁ You don't know that your car has not been stolen.
P₂ If you don't know that your car has not been stolen then you don't know that it is parked on City Road.
C Therefore, you don't know that your car is parked on City Road.
4. A more worrying skeptical argument:

P₁ You don't know that you are not a BIV.
P₂ If you don't know that you are not a BIV then you don't know that you have hands.
C Therefore, you don't know that you have hands.
5. The argument generalised:

P₁ You don't know that it is not the case that S.
P₂ If you don't know that it is not the case that S then you don't know that O.
C Therefore, you don't know that O.¹
6. We can run this argument for *any* O, and if S is suitably chosen the argument is very persuasive. This makes it look as though we do not know *anything*. Worse still, it makes it look as though we *cannot* know anything.
7. The argument in (5) leads to skepticism about the external world. Other arguments lead to skepticism about other things: Russell's scenario in which the universe came into existence only five minutes ago, with all the same historical evidence and memories (skepticism about the past); Descartes' dreaming scenario² (skepticism about ...).
8. Possible responses to these arguments:
 - a. Accept the conclusion
 - b. Reject the first premise
 - c. Reject the second premise
 - d. Deny that the argument is valid
9. Accepting the conclusion.

¹ See Keith DeRose and Ted A. Warfield (eds.) (1999), *Skepticism: A Contemporary Reader* (Oxford: OUP), Introduction; Dancy, Jonathan (1985), *An Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell), ch. 1; and SEP 'Skepticism'.

² In his *Meditations*.

Then we must accept that we don't have anywhere near as much knowledge as we normally think we do, and perhaps have *no* knowledge, and perhaps *cannot* have knowledge. Can we *really* do that?

10. Rejecting the first premise.

We can turn the argument around:³

- P₁ I know that I have hands.
- P₂ If I know that I have hands then I know that I am not a BIV.
- C Therefore, I know that I am not a BIV.

(One person's *modus ponens* is another person's *modus tollens*.) But can we *really* be satisfied by that?

11. Rejecting the second premise.

This amounts to denying the very plausible principle of closure of knowledge under known implication ('closure of knowledge' for short):

(Closure) If S knows that P and S knows that P entails Q then S knows that Q.

If we reject this principle we must explain *why* it is false, and why it seems to be *true*. (We will see some attempts at that.)

12. Denying validity.

But it seems to be straightforwardly valid, so the task is then to explain why it is not, and why it appears to be so. (We will consider one such approach, which claims that the argument trades on an equivocation in 'know'.)

³ See G. E. Moore (1959), *Philosophical Papers* (London: Allen and Unwin), p. 247.