

GENERAL PHILOSOPHY

WEEK 2: KNOWLEDGE

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INTRODUCTION

Sceptical scenario arguments:

1. You cannot know that **SCENARIO** doesn't obtain.
2. If you cannot know that **SCENARIO** doesn't obtain, you cannot know **TARGET**.
3. So, you cannot know **TARGET**.

For example:

1. You cannot know that you are not a BIV.
2. If you cannot know that you are not a BIV, you cannot know that you have hands.
3. So, you cannot know that you have hands.

This week:

- Moore's response,
- Nozick's response,
- Reliablism's response,
- Externalism v. Internalism.

MOORE

G. E. Moore argues against the sceptic's first premise, the claim that you cannot know that you are not a BIV.

He thought you *can* know that you are not a BIV.

Moore's argument:

1. You can know that you have hands.
2. If you can know that you have hands, you can know that you are not a BIV.
3. So, you can know that you are not a BIV.

Moore's argument reverses the sceptic's:

- Moore's second premise is equivalent to the sceptic's.
- The sceptic employs *modus ponens* to infer that you cannot know you have hands.
- Moore employs *modus tollens* to infer that you can know that you are not a BIV.

So whose first premise should we prefer?

- Moore: you can know that you have hands
- Sceptic: you cannot know that you are not a BIV.

Maybe we are more *certain* of Moore's.

But why think this certainty is of any epistemological significance?

Compare Hume's observation, last week, that we are psychologically incapable of giving up our belief in the external world.

A natural reaction to this is, "So what? How can that be epistemologically significant?"

The sceptic gives this argument for her premise:

1. **BRAIN IN A VAT** is subjectively indistinguishable from how things are.
2. If a scenario is subjectively indistinguishable from how things are, you can't rule out the possibility that it obtains.
3. If you can't rule out the possibility that a scenario obtains, you cannot know that it does not obtain.
4. So, you cannot know that **BRAIN IN A VAT** does not obtain.

Where does Moore think this goes wrong?

- Moore says that, while he cannot *prove* that the dreaming scenario does not obtain, he thinks that he nevertheless has conclusive evidence that it does not.
- So he seems to deny the third claim, that to know that **BRAIN IN A VAT** does not obtain, one needs to be able to rule out the possibility that it does.

One reason why Moore's response may seem unsatisfying: while he seems to reject the third claim, he gives us no explanation as to **WHY** it should be rejected.

(Compare Moore here with the reliabilist, below.)

NOZICK

KNOWLEDGE

According to Nozick, S knows that P IFF

1. It is true that P
2. S believes that P
3. If P were false, S wouldn't believe that P
4. If P were true, S would believe that P

More briefly, S knows that P IFF S has a true belief that P which **TRACKS THE TRUTH**.

In meeting the third condition, S's belief that P is said to be **SENSITIVE**.

The third and fourth conditions are **COUNTERFACTUALS**.
To check whether they hold, we need to consider how things would be in certain possible situations.

"If I had dropped this glass, the water in it would have spilled"
This seems true because in the **CLOSEST** possible situations in which I drop the glass (those most similar to the actual situation), the water spills.

It doesn't seem to matter that there are possible situations in which I drop the glass but the water does not spill - someone is hiding under the table, the water freezes.
Those situations are less close.

More generally, it seems that a counterfactual holds IFF, in the closest possible situations in which the antecedent is true, the consequent is also true:
"If it were the case that P, it would be the case that Q"

In these terms, Nozick's view is that S knows that P IFF

1. It is true that P
2. S believes that P
3. In the closest possible situations in which P is false, S doesn't believe that P
4. In the closest possible situations in which P is true, S does believe that P.

SCEPTICISM

What's this got to do with the BIV argument?

Do you know the proposition that you are not a BIV (who is being deceived by a deranged scientist)?
Nozick: No. Even if you truly believe that you are not a BIV, you don't know it.

The closest possible situations in which it is false (in which you are a BIV) are ones in which, because you are being deceived, things seem to you to be the same as they actually seem. In those situations, you still believe that you are not a BIV.
So your belief is not sensitive.

Do you know the proposition that that you have hands?
Nozick: Yes, assuming that you truly believe that you have hands.

The closest possible situations in which it is false (in which you don't have hands) are ones in which, say, you have been in an industrial accident. In those situations, you don't believe that you have hands.

So Nozick's third condition is met. Your belief is sensitive.

And the fourth condition? If the proposition that you have hands were true, would you have believed it?

The closest possible situation in which it is true (in which you do have hands) is the actual situation. In that situation, you believe that you have hands. So Nozick's fourth condition is met too.

So Nozick's fourth condition is met as well.

According to Nozick, then, the sceptic's second premise is false: even though you don't (and in fact cannot) know that you are not a BIV, you can know that you have hands.

We saw the sceptic's argument for this premise last week:

1. You know that the proposition that you have hands entails the proposition that you are not a BIV.
2. If you know that the proposition that you have hands entails the proposition that you are not a BIV, and you can know that you have hands, then you can know that you are not a BIV.
3. So, if you can know that you have hands, you can know that you are not a BIV.
4. So, if you cannot know that you are not a BIV, you cannot know that you have hands.

- Nozick accepts premise 1. (Homework: explain why!)
- But he denies premise 2.

So Nozick thinks there are counterexamples to **EPISTEMIC CLOSURE**:

If you know that P entails Q, and you can know that P, then you can also know that Q.

Notice that, unlike Moore, Nozick explains not just where he thinks the sceptic's argument fails, but **WHY**. His account of knowledge is playing a crucial role.

RELIABLISM

According to reliabilists, S knows that P IFF

1. It is true that P
2. S believes that P
3. S's belief was produced by a reliable process.

Do you know the proposition that you have hands?

Reliabilist: Yes, assuming that you truly believe that you have hands.

Your belief that you have hands is produced by a reliable process: perception.

Do you know the proposition that you are not a BIV?

Reliabilist: Yes!

Your belief that you are not a BIV is produced by applying a reliable process, deductive inference, to your belief that you have hands, which is itself produced by a reliable process.

According to reliabilists, then, the sceptic's first premise is false: you **CAN** know that you are not a BIV.

Consider again the sceptic's argument for this:

1. **BRAIN IN A VAT** is subjectively indistinguishable from how things are.
2. If a scenario is subjectively indistinguishable from how things are, you can't rule out the possibility that it obtains.
3. If you can't rule out the possibility that a scenario obtains, you cannot know that it does not obtain.
4. So, you cannot know that **BRAIN IN A VAT** does not obtain.

Like Moore, the reliabilist rejects premise 3. To know that a sceptical scenario does not obtain, you do not need to be able to rule out the possibility that it does, i.e. prove that it does not.

But unlike Moore, the reliabilist offers an explanation as to **WHY** premise 3 fails: an account of knowledge on which it requires only reliably produced true belief.

EXTERNALISM V. INTERNALISM

Here are two (connected) worries one might raise about Nozick's and the reliabilist's responses to the sceptic.

FIRST WORRY

In different ways, both Nozick and the reliabilist argue that your belief that you have hands constitutes knowledge, *given the assumption that you have hands.*

Doesn't this beg the question against the sceptic?

No. The sceptic doesn't deny that your belief that you have hands is *true*. She argues that it cannot constitute *knowledge*.

But if the reliabilist's or Nozick's analyses of knowledge are correct, your belief that you have hands *can* constitute knowledge - and *does* constitute knowledge if it is true.

Another way of putting this: both Nozick and the reliabilist try to show that it is possible that we *do* know that we have hands. But they try to do this without *proving* that we know we have hands.

So both Nozick and the reliabilist allow for the possibility that we know that we have hands even if we do not know that we know that we hands.

So they both deny the **KK PRINCIPLE**:
One knows that P only if one knows that one knows that P.

SECOND WORRY

On both Nozick's and the reliabilist's analyses, whether S's true belief that P constitutes knowledge that P depends on factors that may be external to S's mind:

- whether S's belief is sensitive (Nozick),
- or reliably produced (the reliabilist).

This is **EXTERNALISM** about knowledge.

By contrast, consider: S knows that P IFF

1. It is true that P
2. S believes that P
3. S is able to produce an argument for P.

On this analysis, whether S's true belief that P constitutes knowledge that P depends only on factors that are internal to S's mind.

This is **INTERNALISM** about knowledge.

Laurence Bonjour raises a potential problem for externalism about knowledge:

Norman, under certain conditions that usually obtain, is a completely reliable clairvoyant with respect to certain kinds of subject matter. He possesses no evidence or reasons of any kind for or against the general possibility of such a cognitive power, or for or against the thesis that he possesses it. One day Norman comes to believe that the President is in New York City, though he has no evidence either for or against this belief. In fact the belief is true and results from his clairvoyant power, under circumstances in which it is completely reliable.

Bonjour (1980) 'Externalist Theories of Empirical Knowledge', p. 62.

Norman's true belief is both sensitive and reliably produced.
But does Norman know that the President is in New York City?

SUMMARY

We might insist that Norman does know that the President is in New York City.

But what if we amend the case, and give Norman lots of evidence that he is not clairvoyant?

Moore's runs the sceptic's argument in reverse, and denies the sceptic's first premise, the claim that we cannot know that we are not BIVs.

If we are dissatisfied with Moore's response, that may be at least partly because he doesn't explain **WHY** the sceptic's argument fails.

Nozick denies the sceptic's second premise, the claim that we cannot know we have hands if we cannot know that we are not BIVs.

He therefore denies **EPISTEMIC CLOSURE**.

This follows from his account of knowledge as true belief that **TRACKS THE TRUTH**.

Reliabilists deny the sceptic's first premise, the claim that we cannot know that we are not BIVs.

This follows from their account of knowledge as true belief that is **RELIABLY PRODUCED**.

Both Nozick and the reliabilist offer **EXTERNALIST** accounts of knowledge and deny the **KK PRINCIPLE**.

Laurence Bonjour's **CLAIRVOYANT** case presents a challenge for externalism.