

Scepticism

Introduction

- What, if anything, can we know?
Scepticism gives a negative answer to questions of this sort. On a first approximation, it is the view that *withholds assent to*, or *denies*, knowledge or belief attribution on the basis of doubt.
- Global vs. Local Scepticism:
Global: We cannot know *anything* because:
 1. Knowledge requires certainty
 2. We cannot be certain of anything

∴ We cannot know anything

Introduction (2)

Local Scepticism:

- (A) Doubting epistemic features of beliefs or knowledge
 - (1) certainty, (2) justifiability, (3) rationality, etc.
- (B) Doubting different belief-generating mechanisms
 - (1) induction, (2) IBE, (3) causation, etc.
- (C) Doubting different domains
 - (1) unobservables, (2) external world, (3) other minds, etc.
- (D) ...
- (...) Combinations of these.

The Sceptical Challenge

- Positive claims to knowledge presuppose the defeat of the corresponding version of scepticism.
- Challenge: To find a way to respond to sceptical arguments.
- Early Answers:
 - (1) Cartesian: I think, therefore I am.

Problem: This presumably defeats the global sceptic, but knowledge on this view is really thin.

(2) G.E. Moore's argument:

1. I know I have two hands
2. If I know I have two hands, I know there is an external world
∴ I know there is an external world

Problem: Premise 1 is question-begging.

Brains in Vats

- A brain in a vat (BIV) is the modern analogue to the Cartesian evil demon.
- BIV is the most popular form of scepticism. It questions our knowledge of the external world.
- NB: The Cartesian answer doesn't apply here because an individual mind (or at least brain) is presupposed.
- Suppose that Neo is a BIV.

Question: Does Neo know that he's in an epistemology lecture?
Answer: NO

Question: Do we (as individuals) know that we're in an epistemology lecture?

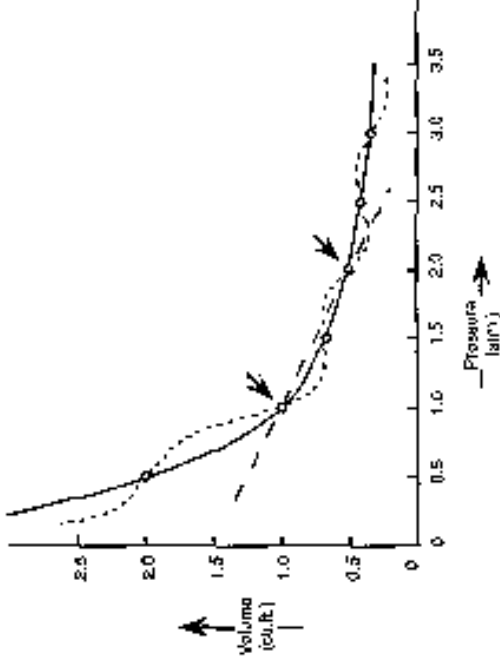
Sceptical Answer: NO

Individual Answer: YES (most people at least)

Brains in Vats (2)

- How do we justify the claim that we're not in Neo's shoes?
- Two Hypotheses:
 - H₁: I'm in an epistemology lecture in Bristol right now.
 - H₂: I'm a BIV being stimulated to believe that I'm in an epistemology lecture in Bristol right now.
- *Underdetermination*: The sensory evidence is exactly the *same* and thus cannot determine which hypothesis is the right one.

Curve-fitting example illustrates the underdetermination of theories by evidence.



Brains in Vats (3)

- Indeed, the choice is not just between H_1 and H_2 . According to the underdetermination problem, there are indefinitely (perhaps infinitely) many hypotheses compatible with this evidence.
- The sensory evidence could be either:
 - the product of the external world
 - the product of a BIV simulation
 - the product of an evil demon deceiving me
 - the product of imagination
 - the product of a dream
 - the product of ...
- I know that I have the perceptual experiences. I cannot infer from this where they come from. So, I am not justified in using them as a basis for believing I'm in an epistemology lecture.

Brains in Vats (4)

An Internalist-Sceptical Argument:

1. Justification is necessary for knowledge
 2. To be justified in believing something one has to have gathered enough evidence to rule out all alternatives.
 3. My experience is not sufficient to rule the BIV alternative
- ∴ I do not know that I'm in an epistemology lecture in Bristol

Defending Knowledge: Take 1

- The externalist's 'reply' to the sceptic:
 - That *Neo* is in a bad epistemic situation (i.e. has lots of false beliefs) doesn't entail that *I'm* in a bad epistemic situation.
 - It would be wrong to mistrust *my* reliable perceptions, just because I know that Neo's are unreliable ones.
- An externalist anti-sceptical argument:
 1. To have knowledge it is enough to be in a good epistemic state.
 2. I don't have to be in a good epistemic state and know that I am.
 3. I don't reason from experience to reality and I shouldn't reason this way: I should just take my experiences at face value.
- ∴ I do know that I am in a lecture.

Scepticism Again

- A potentially externalist-proof sceptical argument.
- The argument rests on the closure principle, i.e. ‘knowledge is closed under known logical implication’.
- The Closure Principle: If you know that p, and that p logically entails q, then according to the closure principle it follows that you know that q.
- The Sceptic’s Use of the Closure Principle:
 1. The Closure Principle - premise
 2. I don’t know I’m not a brain in a vat - premise
 3. I know that (if I’m in a lecture on earth, I am not a brain in a vat) - premise
 4. | I know I’m in a lecture on earth - assumption
 5. | I know I’m not a brain in a vat - 1, 3, 4
 6. If I know I’m in a lecture on earth, I know I’m not a brain in a vat - CP 4-5
 7. I don’t know I’m in a lecture on earth - modus tollens 2, 6

Defending Knowledge: Take 2

- Three General Options
 - A. Accept the conclusion
 - B. Show invalidity
 - C. Reject a premise
 - In this context:
 - A. Leads to Scepticism
 - B. Non-starter
 - C. Which premise?
 - 2 and 3 look firm. What about 1 (the closure principle)?
 - Nozick and Dretske deny the closure principle.
- Problem: This seems a great sacrifice to make.

Food for Thought

- Can we give an adequate response to the sceptic prior to finding out exactly what knowledge is?

Reading

- P. Unger ‘An Argument for Skepticism’, in Kim and Sosa (eds.) *Epistemology: An Anthology*.