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Scepticism: The End of the Road

The direct way to promote scepticism is to take a Cartesian sceptical hypothesis (*H*) and argue that nothing is known (~K*p*) since *H* is true.

IA 1. *H*
2. *H* entails ~K*p* (definition)
3. ~K*p*

This Argument *For* Ignorance (IA), as it might be called, is indefensible since *H* entails that it can never be known. That is more of a pragmatic, procedural objection to scepticism, however, than a substantive refutation, since scepticism *might be true* even if it is indefensible. It is this modal dimension of the problem that philosophers have found most troubling.[1] If it means anything more than that the sceptical hypothesis is not logically inconsistent, it must be that it is not known to be false (~K~*H*). That, really, is the sceptic's only alternative to arguing that *H* is true—that it might be true and is not known to be false. The defense of scepticism can then continue as follows: since *H* entails ~K*p*, ~K~*H* entails that it is not known that anything is known, ~K~(~K*p*) (ie. ~KK*p*), in accordance with the principle that knowledge is closed under entailment (CP), hence that nothing is known, ~K*p*, in accordance with the principle that K*p* is virtually equivalent to KK*p* (KK).

1 Pritchard (2005) says that the modal dimension of the sceptic's conclusion is what makes it so troubling: '... regardless of whether we are ... the victim of a sceptical hypothesis, it remains that we do not know ... everyday propositions ...' (p2) He means that the mere possibility of *H* implies that we know nothing (~K*p*).

AI	1. ~K~H	
	2. H entails ~K*p*	(definition)
	3. ~KK*p*	(CP)
	4. ~K*p*	(KK)

This has been called the Argument *From* Ignorance (DeRose, 1995) because it opens quietly with a demurrer instead of an affirmation of *H*, more in keeping with scepticism's spirit of agnosticism. Yet while it begins thus unassumingly with a shift of modality, thus avoiding the charge of indefensibility, AI still somehow manages to produce the sceptical conclusion at the end—the very thing it was supposed to get around the problem of arguing directly for. How is it possible to get ~K*p* from ~K~*H* and ~KK*p*, when we know *a priori* that any argument for ~K*p* is self-defeating?

If it looks like a mouse has come into being by spontaneous generation out of grey rags and dust, we would do well (says Wittgenstein) to examine the rags carefully to see how a mouse may have hidden in them. Here the mouse is hiding in the rules of inference—not CP, but KK. The whole argument (AI) from ~K~*H* to ~KK*p* to ~K*p* runs counter to the principle of the virtual equivalence of K*p* and KK*p* (KK), which is supposed to justify the last step. The standard interpretation of KK is that K*p* is defensible iff KK*p* is defensible, and equally that ~K*p* is indefensible iff ~KK*p* is indefensible. But ~K*p* is the sceptical thesis; so ~KK*p* must be as indefensible as ~K*p*. If (on the other hand) KK is not valid, one can well argue for ~KK*p* *via* *~K~H* even if one cannot argue for ~K*p* directly *via H*; but there is then no justification for the last step from ~KK*p* back to ~K*p*. In short, AI relies on a rule of inference (KK) at the end that it presupposes is invalid to begin with. That puts an end to the intuition that scepticism *might be true*, even though it is indefensible. It comes to nought.

~K~*H* is a pseudo-sceptical hypothesis. It is a philosophical missile with a dummy warhead (~KK*p*): the sceptic can arm the warhead by hooking it up to ~K*p* by KK, but then it is too heavy with implication, as it were, to be delivered by ~K~*H*. ~KK*p* can be delivered only if it has no explosive implications. It is thus perfectly compatible with the knowledge-claims of philosophers like Moore. That is the position at any rate that Moore staked out at the end of *Proof of an External World*, where he claimed that he knew that 'here is one hand and here is another' *(P),* while conceding that he could not prove it to be true without proving that he was not dreaming, which he did not think he could do (Moore, 1959, p147). He was in effect claiming both K*P* and ~K~*H*. It has been called an 'abominable conjunction' (DeRose 1995, p28), but it is a defensible form of fallibilism, defined here as the view that knowing (K*p*) is compatible with *not* knowing that scepticism is false (~K~*H*) and *not* knowing that we know (~KK*p*). We can know things even though we do not know we are not dreaming or deceived—K*P* and ~K~*H*—because the mere possibility of mistake and error (~K~*H*) has no sceptical implications. Knowing implies that we are not mistaken (~*H*), not that we know we are not (K~*H*). (It implies that we are not mistaken, not that we cannot be.)

It is a mistake to try to build the impossibility of mistake (K~*H*) into the definition of knowledge (K*p*). It is the main reason scepticism lingers in the literatrue. K*P* seems to entail K~*H* and that allows the construction of the second premise (~K~*H* → ~K*p*) of an abbreviated form of AI (AI*), which has become the standard form of AI (Black 2002, p148; Byrne 2004, p303; DeRose 1996, p1; Dretske 2014, p23; Lewis 1996, p564, Pritchard 2002, p217; Prtichard 2008; Pryor 2000 p521-2; Rysiew 2016, Sec.3.1; Schaffer 2004, p138; Unger 1971, 1975):

AI* 1. No one knows that *H* is not the case [~K~*H*]
2. If no one knows that *H* is not the case, no one knows that P [~K~*H* → ~K*P*]
3. No one knows that *P* [~K*P*]

The second premise is a hyper-sceptical misstatement of the terms of the argument. It is *H*, not ~K~*H*, that entails ~K*P*. K*P* entails ~*H*, not K~*H*. If we know anything, *H* is false—not necessarily known to be false, just false. It is possible to know something (K*P*) without knowing we are *not* dreaming or being deceived (~K~*H),* as long as we are *not* dreaming or being deceived. (Moore's position at the end of *PEW*.) K*P* does not entail K~*H*.(or K*H* or for that matter). Why should we have to know that *H* is false (K~*H*) in order to know anything (K*p*)? (Who needs to know?) If we do not know (~K~*H),* all that follows is that we do not know that we know (~KK*p*), not that we do not know (~K*p*).

One reason ~K~*H* seems to entail ~K*p* is that the simplest sceptical hypothesis seems to be just the negation of what anyone claims. (~*p* entails ~K*p*, so substituting ~*p* for '*H*' in '~K~*H*' yields '~K~(~*p*)', ie. ~K*p*.) Of course there is no arguing directly that nothing is known on the grounds that nothing is true—that would be the direct, IA argument, which is self-defeating; and the indirect AI argument, ~*K*~(~*p*), ergo ~K*p*, begs the question in a straightforward way (*pet. prin. repetitione*). As we learned from *The Argument Clinic*, an argument is not simply gainsaying what someone says—('It can be', 'No, it can't')—and an argument for scepticism cannot simply be the denial of what anyone claims to know. To have any bite the 'not-*p*' sceptical hypothesis has to be a proposition that entails the negation of what we claim to know *other than the plain negation of what we claim to know*. It has to be, as Lewis puts it, 'a certain possibility in which *not-P',* another proposition, *Q* that is incompatible with *P*.[2] It is only in that case that claiming K*P* commits us to K~*Q*, which allows for the sceptical argument to proceed: if we cannot 'eliminate' *Q,* if we cannot claim to know that *Q* is false (~K~*Q*), we cannot claim to

2 'The sceptical argument is ... just this: ... If you claim that S knows that *P,* and yet you grant that S cannot eliminate a certain possibility in which *not-P,* it certainly seems as if you have granted that S does not ... know that *P*.' [Lewis 1996, p564]

know that *P* (~K*P*). Dretske supplied many sceptical arguments of this sort: if we do not know that the animals we saw in the zoo are not mules in disguise (and we do not), then we do not know that they are zebras; if we do not know that it is not colored water in the bottle, we do not know it is wine; etc. ~K~*Q* is evidently true in these ordinary cases, so the only way to avoid scepticism, according to Dretske, is to reject the Closure Principle, which takes us from K*P* to K~*Q,* given that *P* entails ~*Q*.

Only it is not "given" that *P* entails ~*Q* (that *P* and *Q* are incompatible). It is not true that any proposition has *a proposition other than* i*ts negation* (and equivalents) *that is false if it is true*. Propositions we ordinarily claim to know are indeed surrounded by propositions that are false instead of true, but the fact that a proposition is false when another is true does not mean that they are incompatible. (At most it means that one does not entail the other, not that one entails the negation of the other.) Some of these propositions that happen to be false *must* be false*, given other things that we know*, but apart from that, one empirical proposition, *P*, says nothing about another, *Q*. They are logically independent. It does not follow from the fact that the animals we saw in the zoo are zebras, that they are *not* mules in disguise; it only follows from that fact *plus* the fact (among many others) that zebras are not mules. From the fact that it is wine in the bottle it does not follow that it is *not* colored water; it only follows from that fact *plus* the fact (among others) that wine is not water. So when we claim to know such a thing as that it is wine in the bottle, we do not commit thereby to claiming that it is *not* colored water, because the one does not entail the other. If we do not know it is not colored water in the bottle—and ordinarily we do not—it does not follow that we do not know it is wine. All that follows is that we do not know *either* that it is wine *or* that wine is not water—and that is not grounds for scepticism. (It is how knowing and not knowing work in a world of facts that are logically independent.) We can know something is wine without knowing it is not water (even if, as happens to be the case, wine is not water). We can know the animals we saw are zebras without knowing that zebras are not mules. We are simply ignorant of some general facts in each case; but ignorance is not grounds for scepticism, unless it is ignorance of something that we may be supposed to know (because of what we claim). Ignorance of general facts of nature does not undermine particular claims of knowledge. One might as well argue that because we do not know that all ravens are black that we do not know that the raven we see in front of us is black. Inductuve knowledge operates quite independently of deductive knowledge.

Claiming *KP* does not commit us to claiming that *Q* is false, if the conjunction of *P* and *Q* is false as a matter of fact, and not impossible. $\sim(P \cdot Q) \rightarrow ((P \rightarrow \sim Q)\ v\ (Q \rightarrow \sim P))$ might suggest otherwise: it is a tautology and seems to imply that if the conjunction of *P* and *Q* is (materially) false, then one conjunct must entail the other. It is one of the "fallacies" of material implication. The so-called paradox of material implication is that any false proposition (materially) implies, and any true proposition is (materially) implied by, any other proposition. It is not really a fallacy, of course, but it really is a fallacy to suppose that the (material) fact that *P* and *Q* are not both true entails that they are incompatible and that either entails the negation of the other. Observvation can indicate that the conjunction of *P* and *Q* is false, by presenting one without the other, but it cannot indicate that the conjunction is impossible. That goes beyond anything that we can observe.

'Not-*p*' sceptics betray their scepticism by their circumspection. They doubt that we know that the animals we saw in the zoo are zebras *and not mules*, that the stuff in the bottle is wine *and not colored water,* etc.; they do *not* doubt that that the animals in the zoo are *zebras and not elephants in disguise or airplanes*, or that the stuff in the bottle is *wine and not the Atlantic Ocean or the tail of a comet*. Like everyone else they are constrained by acknowledged facts. If nothing is known, as they claim, anything is possible, and then it makes as much sense to doubt that the stuff in the bottle is wine *and not water* as to doubt that it is wine *and not an interstellar cloud of gas or anything else*. It makes sense to doubt something particular, *P*, *via* ~K~*Q*, only if one means something *particular* by '*Q*' (Wittgenstein), ie. only if '*Q*' stands for 'a certain possibility' and is not being used as a variable for any proposition whatsoever. Normal doubt is urging that it is not the case that K*P* since ~K~*Q*, on the grounds that (*P* and *Q*) is impossible, where the *P*s and *Q*s stand in place of partiuclar propositions. The 'not-*P'* sceptical argument mimics ordinary, regular doubt, using variables instead of constants: we do not know that *anything*, *P*, is true, if we do not know that *anything*, *Q*, that entails *not-P* is false. As a general argument it is just the trivial claim that we do not know anything (variable) if we do not know that its negation (variable) is not true.

Another way of getting the hyper-sceptical, second premise of AI* (~K~*H* → ~K*P*) is by CP from (*P* → ~*H*) and ~K~*H* (Dretske 2014, p16). Dretske thought that ordinary propositions like "here is a hand ..." (P) have 'heavyweight implications' like ~*H*, so that K*P* entails K~*H* by CP and, by contraposition, ~K~*H* entails ~K*P*. To avoid scepticism he urged rejecting CP, which fails, he maintained, because reasons for claiming to know such a thing as *P* do not "transmit" their warrant to its "heavyweight" implications (eg. 'we are not dreaming'). The problem is not CP, however; it is that ordinary propositions like *P* do not have 'heavyweight' implications like ~*H.* (*H* entails ~K*P*, not ~*P*.) The reason 'we can't *see* that we are *not* dreaming' (as we can see that 'here is a hand …') is that ~*H* is not an implication of *P*. That there is a hand here or a tree over there does not imply that we are *not* dreaming or deceived in any way. CP does not fail; it simply fails to *apply* where there is no valid implication.

How do we get the spurious idea that ($P \rightarrow \sim H$)? (1) One way is to construct an *'H'* that entails that *P* ('here is one hand …') is false *per accidens*. The 'brain-in-a-vat' version of *H* includes 'handless' in some renditions, so that *P* entails that we are not *handless* brains-in-a-vat, hence that we are not *handless* brain-in-a-vat deceived into thinking that we know that *P*.[3] If then we are deceived in that way, *P* must of course be false—but the implication is *per accidens*, the result of mis*handling* the sceptical hypothesis, making it seem that *H* entails ~K*P* because it entails ~*P* (which entails ~K*P*). That is a distortion of the sceptical argument. It is not how it works. It is possible to be deceived into thinking that we have knowledge without supposing that something is so that is not so. (*H* entails ~K*P*, not ~*P*.)

(2) The fact that K*P* entails both *P* and ~*H* makes it seem that either one entails the other. It is another "fallacy" of material implication. $\{(p \rightarrow (q \text{ and } r)\} \rightarrow \{(q \rightarrow r) \text{ or } (r \rightarrow q)\}$ is a tautology, since the consequent is the disjunction of a material implication ($p \rightarrow \sim H$) and its converse ($\sim H \rightarrow p$), which is a tautology; but it does not mean that one or the other of any two propositions entails the other—even if and when they are both consequents of the same proposition. The fact that something green is not blue and is also not red does not imply that what is not blue is not red (or *v. v.*); 10 is divisible by 2 and also by 5, but what is divisible by 2 is not necessarily divisible by 5. K*P* implies both *P* and ~*H*, but it does not follow that either entails the other. The inference is tempting, however, when *'P'* is a present-tense, indicative

3 '... the proposition that I have hands implies that I am not a handless being, and *a fortiori* that I am not a handless being deceived by a demon into thinking that I have hands.' Lewis (1996) 564

observation-statement, like the premise of Moore's proof. It seems to be indubitable, if true ($P \rightarrow \sim H$) or true since it is indubitable ($\sim H \rightarrow P$). It seems that either '*this* is a hand, so I cannot be dreaming ($P \rightarrow \sim H$)' or '*this* is a hand unless (or else) I'm dreaming ($\sim H \rightarrow P$)'. Knowing seems to connect the truth of what is known (P) with the negation of scepticism ($\sim H$). The illusion disappears when we distinguish *the fact*, *which we know* (K*P*), from *the fact that we know* in the sense that *we are not mistaken* (K~*H*). It is simply a matter of rejecting the second premise of AI* and not building the impossibility of error into the concept of knowledge. K*P* goes with ~K~*H* (Moore's position at the end of *PEW*).

Dretske took some potshots at Moore ('hocus pocus', 'chutzpah, not philosophy') for claiming to know that 'here is one hand …', but not that he is *not* dreaming—as if Moore were not the last philosopher one would suspect of accepting ($P \rightarrow \sim H$) and the hyper-sceptical, second premise of AI* ($KP \rightarrow K\sim H$) built on it (Dretske 2014, p38). In fact Moore claimed that he did *not* know that he is not dreaming (~K~*H*), *not* that he did know it. He anticipated that many people would be dissatisfied with his proof for that very reason. They wamt a proof of his premise, *P*, but to come up with a proof of *P* Moore thought he would have to prove that he was not dreaming ($\sim H$), which he did not think he could do. At the same time he did not think it necessary to make *that* argument to have a successful proof, since proofs require that premises only be known, not proved, and it is possible to know something (K*P*) without being able to prove it (~KK*P*), that is, without knowing that scepticism is false (~K~*H*).

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