

What We Can Learn From The Skeptical Puzzle

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(This version might be different in certain respects from the published version.)

ABSTRACT: *There is reason to think that a familiar and frequently used epistemic closure principle is false. Given this, the relevant instance of that principle should be removed from a familiar skeptical argument, and replaced with an instance of a more plausible epistemic closure principle. Once this has been done, however, we see that even if the resulting skeptical argument is unsound, we need deny neither closure nor the claim that we know the things we ordinarily take ourselves to know. Nothing that the skeptic can do, at least with an argument that makes use of an epistemic closure principle, can ever force us to relinquish closure or the utterly vast stretches of knowledge that we ordinarily take ourselves to have.*

Consider the following anti-skeptical argument, or (ASA):

1. If I know that I have hands, and if I know that my having hands entails that I am not a brain-in-a-vat, then I know that I am not a brain-in-a-vat.
2. I know that my having hands entails that I am not a brain-in-a-vat.
3. I know that I have hands.

Therefore,

4. I know that I'm not a brain-in-a-vat.

By now, this sort of argument is quite familiar, as is its skeptical counterpart.¹ Still, a bit of review might be in order. To begin, to say that something is *S*'s brain-in-a-vat counterpart is to say that it is a bodiless – and therefore handless – brain which is

¹ The skeptical version of (ASA), dubbed the Argument from Ignorance by Keith DeRose (see his "Solving the Skeptical Problem," in K. DeRose and T. A. Warfield (eds.), *Skepticism: A Contemporary Reader*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 183-219), goes like this:

1. If I know that I have hands, and if I know that my having hands entails that I am not a brain-in-a-vat, then I know that I am not a brain-in-a-vat.
2. I know that my having hands entails that I am not a brain-in-a-vat.
3. I don't know that I'm not a brain-in-a-vat.

Therefore,

4. I don't know that I have hands.

floating in a vat of nutrients and which is electrochemically stimulated so as to have perceptual experiences that are exactly similar to those S is now having in what she takes to be normal circumstances. Recall, too, that (ASA) presents a puzzle: Although (1), (2) and (3) are independently plausible, together they support a conclusion, (4), which is *implausible*.

That (2) is plausible seems to require no explanation. With regard to (1), Keith DeRose has us consider what he calls the Abominable Conjunction, or (AC):

AC. I know that I have hands, but I don't know that I'm not a brain-in-a-vat.² It seems that we should deny (AC), and doing so moves us to accept a principle like (1), which is an epistemic closure principle. Finally, (3) is plausible because it seems that I *do* know that I have hands. After all, I am looking directly at my hands in optimal lighting conditions and with my properly-functioning eyes.

Yet even though (1), (2) and (3) are plausible, they support an implausible conclusion, for it seems that in order to know that I'm not a brain-in-a-vat, I must eliminate the possibility that I am a brain-in-a-vat. Yet my brain-in-a-vat counterpart and I have perceptual experiences that are exactly similar – it seems to my brain-in-a-vat counterpart, just as it seems to me, that he has hands, that he is sitting at his desk, that he is situated in such-and-such a fashion relative to his computer, and so on. Accordingly, my perceptual experiences give me no reason to prefer the belief that I am *not* a brain-in-a-vat over the belief that I *am*. And since I have only my perceptual experiences to go on, I cannot eliminate the possibility that I'm a brain-in-a-vat. It

² See *ibid.*, p. 201.

seems, then, that we must give up a plausible claim, either (1), (2), (3), or the denial of (4). But which one should we give up, and why? This is *the skeptical puzzle*.

Responses to this puzzle are as familiar as the puzzle itself. First, we can respond to (ASA) by accepting it outright. This is the *Moorean response*, so called because it represents the sort of response that G. E. Moore might provide. Moore would probably accept (1), (2) and (3), and then claim that it follows from this that (4) is true, that is, that he knows that he is not a brain-in-a-vat. Second, we can accept the denial of (4), and then claim that this should lead us to reject one of (ASA)'s premises. This *skeptical response* rejects (ASA)'s third premise, maintaining that it follows from (1), (2) and the denial of (4) that I don't know that I have hands. Third, we might deny the truth of (1); that is, we might reject the epistemic closure principle expressed in (1). More on this option momentarily. Fourth, and finally,³ we might be able to reconcile the skeptical and Moorean responses. One way to do this would be to show that we should accept the Moorean response in some contexts and the skeptical response in others. The *contextualist response*, versions of which have been provided by Stewart Cohen, Keith DeRose and David Lewis, fits into this fourth way of responding to the skeptical puzzle.⁴

³ So far as I know, no one suggests that we should reject (2), whose truth seems obvious.

⁴ Cohen defends his versions of contextualism in S. Cohen, "How to be a Fallibilist," *Philosophical Perspectives*, 2 (1988), pp. 91-123, and in S. Cohen, "Contextualism, Skepticism, and the Structure of Reasons," *Philosophical Perspectives*, 13 (1999), pp. 57-89. DeRose introduces his contextualism in K. DeRose, "Contextualism and Knowledge Attributions," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 52 (1992), pp. 913-929; and he presents it in further detail in his "Solving the Skeptical Problem." Lewis defends his version of contextualism in D. Lewis, "Elusive Knowledge," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 74 (1996), pp. 549-567.

Yet rather than taking (ASA)'s puzzle at face value and then arguing in favor of a particular solution to it, I want in this paper to turn my attention to the puzzle itself or, rather, to the argument that gives rise to the puzzle, namely, (ASA). I argue that we have no reason to formulate an anti-skeptical argument in the way that (ASA) is formulated and, in particular, that anti-skeptical arguments are at their best when they include an epistemic closure principle that is different from (1). As we will see, when we accept an anti-skeptical argument that includes a different closure principle, we are faced with no skeptical puzzle.

I therefore turn to an examination of (1), which is motivated by the intuition that (AC) is false. Note that (AC) is abominable only because the propositions it includes – *I have hands* and *I'm not a brain-in-a-vat* – stand in some relation, in particular, the former proposition entails the latter. So, we can deny (AC) by insisting on the truth of the following epistemic closure principle:

A. If p entails q , then if S knows that p , S knows that q .

Those who are concerned with responding to the skeptical puzzle don't stop with (A), though, because (A) is false: S might know that she has hands, for example, yet fail to know or to realize that her having hands entails that she is not a handless brain-in-a-vat. In such a case, it seems, S doesn't know that she's not a handless brain-in-a-vat. This difficulty leads those who are concerned with responding to the skeptical puzzle away from (A) and toward (1).

Yet there are persuasive arguments in favor of the claim that (1), like (A), is false. Arguments against (1) have been around for some time now, at least since Fred Dretske

and Robert Nozick, whose arguments against (1) take the form of counterexamples.⁵

Recently, Doris Olin has provided yet another counterexample to (1), which is similar in form to those provided by Dretske and Nozick. She suggests the following case.⁶

Suppose that I know, on the basis of Cynthia's announced intention to do so, that she will watch television the entire evening on Wednesday. Suppose, too, that I know that this entails that there will not be a power failure on Wednesday evening. Nevertheless, as Olin suggests, I do *not* know that there won't be a power failure on Wednesday evening.

Even in the face of such alleged counterexamples, however, the intuitive pull of (1) keeps most of us from rejecting it. Still, Stewart Cohen has recently put what we might think of as counterexamples to (1) into a different package. I very often take myself to know such things as this: That a table, which I observe in a furniture store with my properly-functioning eyes, is red. It seems extremely counterintuitive to deny that I have this bit of knowledge. Yet it also seems counterintuitive to say that my knowing that the table is red is sufficient for my knowing that it is not white and illuminated by red lights. But (1) says that if I know that the table is red, and if I know that its being red entails that it isn't white and illuminated by red lights, then I know that it isn't white and illuminated by red lights. Cohen maintains, and he seems right to do so, that the sufficient conditions for knowing that the table isn't white and illuminated by red lights, as those conditions are expressed in (1), are not strict

⁵ See F. Dretske, "The Pragmatic Dimension of Knowledge," in his *Perception, Knowledge and Belief: Selected Essays*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000; and R. Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981.

⁶ See D. Olin, "A Case Against Closure," *Veritas*, 50 (2005), pp. 235-247, p. 237.

enough – they allow me to know too easily that the table isn't white and illuminated by red lights. This is the problem of easy knowledge.⁷

One way to solve the problem of easy knowledge is to deny that (1) is true. As we have seen, though, (1) has a strong pull on us. Recognizing this, Cohen provides some theoretical reasons for denying (1). He maintains, following Ernest Sosa, that we should distinguish animal knowledge from reflective knowledge. Sosa says that “[o]ne has *animal knowledge* about one’s environment, one’s past, and one’s own experience if one’s judgments and beliefs about these are direct responses to their impact – e.g., through perception or memory – with little or no benefit of reflection or understanding,” while “[o]ne has *reflective knowledge* if one’s judgment or belief manifests not only such direct response to the fact known but also understanding of its place in a wider whole that includes one’s belief and knowledge of it and how these come about.”⁸ Endorsing this distinction, Cohen suggests that animal knowledge and reflective knowledge are different in kind because they play different roles in reasoning. We can suppose for one thing that reflective knowledge is closed under known entailment, but that animal knowledge is not.⁹ Given this, our having animal knowledge that the table is red does not entail, as (1) suggests it does, that we know that the table isn’t white and illuminated by red lights. Hence, (1) is false.

⁷ See S. Cohen, “Basic Knowledge and the Problem of Easy Knowledge,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 65 (2002), pp. 309-329.

⁸ E. Sosa, “Knowledge and Intellectual Virtue,” in E. Sosa, *Knowledge in Perspective: Selected Essays in Epistemology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 225-244, p. 240.

⁹ See Cohen, “Basic Knowledge and the Problem of Easy Knowledge,” p. 327.

It seems, then, that there are plausible counterexamples not only to (A), but also to (1). To this extent, neither (A) nor (1) seems satisfactory as an epistemic closure principle. But what of the intuition that (AC) is false? Fortunately, that intuition is preserved by the truth of *any number* of closure principles, including but certainly not limited to (A) and (1). For example, the following principles preserve the intuition that (AC) is false just as well as either (A) or (1):

STR. For all epistemic agents S and propositions p and q , if S knows that p and that q is incompatible with S's knowing that p , then S knows that $\sim q$.¹⁰

KLE. If x is known by S and x entails y , then S is in a position to know that y .¹¹

HAW. Necessarily, if S knows p , competently deduces q and thereby comes to believe q , while retaining knowledge of p throughout, then S knows q .¹²

Yet these principles face problems of their own—each of these three principles, like (A) and (1) before them, allows us to know too easily that certain skeptical hypotheses are false. That is, each of them faces the problem of easy knowledge. Suppose that S knows that the table is red. Suppose too that she competently deduces that the table is not white and illuminated by red lights, where she counts as performing a competent deduction at least in part because she knows that *the table is red* entails *the table is not white and illuminated by red lights*, and because she knows that the table's being white and illuminated by red lights is incompatible with her knowing that the table is red.

¹⁰ See B. Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984, pp. 24, 27.

¹¹ See P. Klein, "Closure Matters: Academic Skepticism and Easy Knowledge," *Philosophical Issues*, 14 (2004), pp. 165-184, p. 167.

¹² See J. Hawthorne, *Knowledge and Lotteries*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 82. Compare T. Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 117.

Suppose finally that S comes to believe that the table is not white and illuminated by red lights on the basis of her competent deduction, and that she knows throughout that the table is red. In this case, (STR), (KLE) and (HAW) must all maintain that S knows, in a way that seems much too easy, that the table isn't white and illuminated by red lights.

Once again, we seem to face a dilemma. Should we abandon closure altogether? This is certainly one way to respond to (ASA)'s puzzle and, as we have seen, this sort of response has proponents as influential as Dretske and Nozick. On the other hand, though, we still have a pretty strong intuition that some epistemic closure principle is true. Should we settle, then, for a principle with which there are acknowledged problems?

I have recently argued that we are faced with no such dilemma.¹³ There is a closure principle available to us – I call it *Single Source Closure* – that does not face the problem of easy knowledge.

SSC. If S knows via K that p , and if S knows via K^+ that p entails q , and if K or K^+ will allow S reasonably to believe that q , then S knows that q .¹⁴

(SSC) provides no bridge to easy knowledge. Suppose first that

5. I know that the table is red.

Suppose too that

6. I know that its being red entails that it isn't white and illuminated by red

¹³ See T. Black, "Solving the Problem of Easy Knowledge," *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 58 (2008), pp. 597-617.

¹⁴ K and K^+ are belief-producing mechanisms, and K^+ need not be distinct from K. Moreover, the 'or' in 'K or K^+ ' is the *inclusive* 'or'.

lights.

Now, given (1), there's no reason why it wouldn't follow that

7. I know that the table isn't white and illuminated by red lights.

Suppose, though, that instead of (1), we opt for the following instance of (SSC):

- 1*. If I know via vision that the table is red, and if I know via reason that the table's being red entails that it isn't white and illuminated by red lights, and if vision or reason will allow me reasonably to believe that the table isn't white and illuminated by red lights, then I know that the table isn't white and illuminated by red lights.

Given (1*), the above argument for (7) must include the following premise if it's to be valid:

8. Vision or reason will allow me reasonably to believe that the table isn't white and illuminated by red lights.

But (8) is false. First, the white-table hypothesis – that is, the hypothesis that the table is white and illuminated by red lights – is meant to call into question the claim that the table's looking red accurately indicates its being red. That is to say, the white-table hypothesis is a skeptical one. This means that it describes a scenario that is *ex hypothesi* visually indistinguishable from the actual scenario, and that its obtaining is incompatible either with the obtaining of the actual scenario or with one's knowing that the actual scenario obtains. Now, if we are to know that the white-table hypothesis is false, we must be able to distinguish the actual scenario, which, I presume, is one in which the table is red, from scenarios in which the white-table hypothesis is true. Yet

since scenarios in which the white-table hypothesis is false are visually indistinguishable from scenarios in which it is true, vision alone will not support my belief that the white-table hypothesis is false. Thus, I cannot know that the white-table hypothesis is false *simply by looking around and seeing* that the table is in fact red and illuminated only by white lights. In fact, it seems that if vision were the only mechanism available to me, I would not be able to know at all that the white-table hypothesis is false.

Second, reason, on its own, is ill-equipped to support my belief that the white-table hypothesis is false. Since that belief concerns the color of the table, evidence in its favor ought ultimately to come from vision. Moreover, since vision cannot distinguish the table's being red from its being white and illuminated by red lights, reason, even if it were to work together with vision, supports neither our accepting nor our denying the white-table hypothesis. So, since (8) is an essential component of any valid argument from (1), (5) and (6) to (7), closure – that is, Single Source Closure – does not support my knowing (too easily) that the table isn't white and illuminated by red lights. By demanding an additional and, as it turns out, false premise in the argument for (7), Single Source Closure takes away the bridge from (5) to (7).

(SSC) handles Olin's case in a similar fashion. In her case, testimony will allow me reasonably to believe that Cynthia will watch television the entire evening on Wednesday, but testimony will *not* allow me reasonably to believe that there will not be a power failure on Wednesday evening. (SSC) therefore takes away the bridge from

knowledge that Cynthia will watch TV to knowledge that there will be no power failure.

So let's replace (1) in (ASA) with an instance of (1*). Doing so gives us the following argument, (ASA*):

9. If I know via K that I have hands, and if I know via K⁺ that my having hands entails that I'm not a brain-in-a-vat, and if K or K⁺ will allow me reasonably to believe that I'm not a brain-in-a-vat, then I know that I'm not a brain-in-a-vat.
2. I know that my having hands entails that I am not a brain-in-a-vat.
3. I know that I have hands.

Therefore,

4. I know that I'm not a brain-in-a-vat.

Of course, this version of the argument is not valid as it stands: An additional premise is required, and we need to identify both K and K⁺. Here's a version of the argument, call it (ASA**), that gives us what we need:

- 9*. If I know via vision that I have hands, and if I know via reason that my having hands entails that I'm not a brain-in-a-vat, and if vision or reason will allow me reasonably to believe that I'm not a brain-in-a-vat, then I know that I'm not a brain-in-a-vat.
- 2*. I know via reason that my having hands entails that I am not a brain-in-a-vat.
10. Vision or reason will allow me reasonably to believe that I'm not a brain-

in-a-vat.

3. I know that I have hands.

Therefore,

4. I know that I'm not a brain-in-a-vat.

(ASA**) stands up to critical scrutiny much better than (ASA). It also shows us a great deal about the strength or, as the case may be, the weakness of certain skeptical hypotheses. Even if it's true that we don't know that certain skeptical hypotheses are false, it does *not* follow that we lack the knowledge we ordinarily take ourselves to have. Even when he does his very worst, the skeptic fails to strip us of knowledge; even if the skeptic is right that we don't know that we're not brains-in-vats, for example, we still know a great many things.

Suppose, then, that we are faced with (ASA**). What sort of puzzle, if any, arises? Let's begin by noting the obvious: The argument, which is valid, is either sound or unsound. If it is sound, then all of its premises are true, which means, of course, that its conclusion is true, too. What we learn here is something about which methods—namely, *vision* or *reason*—will allow me reasonably to believe that I am not a brain-in-a-vat. How would that work, though? Presumably it would work in something like the following fashion: Either I can *see* that I'm not a brain-in-a-vat, or I can see that I have hands, for example, and then *infer* from that that I am not a brain-in-a-vat.

On the other hand, though, it might very well be that (ASA**) is unsound. Indeed, since it is the skeptic's view that (4) is false, which is to say that I don't know that I'm not a brain-in-a-vat, he must maintain that the argument is unsound. So, given

that (ASA**), which is valid, is unsound, at least one of its premises must be false. Now, though, unlike when we were considering (ASA), we are not faced with the dilemma of denying either closure, some version of which seems to us to be true, or the claim that I know that I have hands, which also seems to us to be true. We also need not deny the claim in (2*) – that I know via reason that my having hands entails that I am not a handless brain-in-a-vat – which seems positively indisputable. In this case, we can maintain that (ASA**) is unsound *because (10) is false*. Thus, even if I *don't* know that I'm not a brain-in-a-vat, as the skeptic maintains, it might still very well be the case both that I *do* know that I have hands and that closure is *true*. Here, we learn that neither vision nor reason, nor vision working together with reason, will allow me reasonably to believe that I am not a brain-in-a-vat.

But which of these responses should we prefer, the one according to which (ASA**) is sound, or the one according to which it is unsound? What I wish to point out here is that *neither option forces us to abandon the claim that I know that I have hands*, and that *neither option forces us to abandon closure*. This is perfectly clear in the case in which (ASA**) is sound. Yet even when the argument is *unsound* – and even when its conclusion is false, in which case I don't know that I'm not a brain-in-a-vat – we need deny neither closure nor the claim that I know that I have hands. For we can in this case simply deny that (10) is true. Even if the skeptic does his worst, we are forced to concede no more than that neither vision nor reason, nor vision and reason working together, will allow us reasonably to believe that we're not brains-in-vats. Nothing that the skeptic can do, at least with an argument that makes use of a closure principle, can

ever force us to relinquish closure or the utterly vast stretches of knowledge that we ordinarily take ourselves to have.

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