7. Stine 1976, Closure and Skepticism

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Closure: What you know is "closed" under known logical implication: If you know *if p, then q*, then if you know *p*, you can also know *q*.

Using $p \rightarrow q$ for "if p then q":
$K(p \rightarrow q) \rightarrow (Kp \rightarrow Kq)$.

The skeptical argument hinges on closure (inferring from P1 to P2):

P1 You know that: *if the animal in front of you is a zebra, then it's not a cleverly-disguised mule.*

$K(zebra \rightarrow not\ mule)$

P2 Therefore, if *you know that it's a zebra*, then *you know that it's not a cleverly-disguised mule.*

$K(zebra) \rightarrow K(not\ mule)$

P3 You *don't* know that it's not a cleverly-disguised mule.

It's NOT true that $K(not\ mule)$

C Therefore, you *don't* know that it's a zebra.

So it's NOT true that $K(zebra)$

This argument is valid.

So to reject the conclusion we must reject one of the premises.

Deny P2? (I.e. deny Closure?) Stine thinks this is a non-starter.

If P2 were false, we should be able to assert a counterexample—but that sounds contradictory:

> ?? "I know it's a zebra, but for all I know it's instead a cleverly-disguised mule."

This sounds contradictory. Compare:
?? "I know it's a zebra, but I don't know if it's a zebra."

Instead, Stine offers us a way to deny P3.

Stine: you know *p* if you can rule out *all relevant alternatives* to *p*.

But what the relevant alternatives to *p* are depends on the *context*.

In some (skeptical) contexts, a cleverly-disguised mule is a relevant alternative to a zebra; but in most (normal) contexts, it's not relevant. →In contexts where it's not relevant, P3 is false: you *do* know it's not a cleverly-disguised mule.

We need to *hold fixed* what the relevant alternatives are as we consider the argument. If not, we're performing the fallacy of **equivocation**.

Compare:

P1* Banks are often flooded by their rivers.

If "bank" is interpreted as "riverbank", the argument is sound and unsurprising; if it is interpreted as "financial institution", C* and P1* are both false.

P2* You shouldn't keep your money in the sort of place that is often flooded.

C* Therefore, you shouldn't keep your money at a bank.

Likewise, says Stine: if "know" is interpreted such that *cleverly-disguised mule* is a relevant alternative, then C and P3 are both true.

know$_{hi}$

On the other hand, if "know" is interpreted such that the relevant alternatives are *giraffe*, *gazelle*, etc., then P3 and C are both obviously false.

know$_{lo}$

Moreover it's perfectly legitimate (and normal) to use "know" in the latter way!

Compare: "all" contextually restricted. "All the glasses are empty."

So the skeptic is correct that there's *a* way of speaking on which their thesis is true, and we "know" almost nothing.

Likewise: there's a reading on which "All the glasses are empty" is false.

But they're incorrect in thinking that we are wrong in normal, everyday life when we claim to "know" many things.

References

DeRose, Keith, 1995. 'Solving the Skeptical Problem'. *The Philosophical Review*, 104(1):1–52.

Stine, G. C., 1976. 'Skepticism, relevant alternatives, and deductive closure'. *Philosophical Studies*, 29(4):249–261.