10. McGrath 2008: Controversiality and Skepticism

Kevin Dorst
kevindorst@pitt.edu

PHIL 1460
February 25, 2021

I. Knowledge and Skepticism

Our first direct argument for **skepticism**—the denial of *knowledge*.

What is **knowledge**? To know something:

> You must believe it.
>
> It must be *true*.
>
> Your belief must be justified/rational/supported by evidence.

Does a justified, true belief suffice for knowledge? Not always!

Stopped clock case. Belief must also be *safe:*

Your belief is **safe** if it couldn't easily have been false.

It's often thought that knowing that p requires (at least) that your belief that p be justified, true, and safe.

?? "I know it'll rain but I don't believe it will."

?? "It's not going to rain, but Bill knows that it will".

Bill the hermit believes, with no evidence, that my birthday is July 30.

More later in the semester...

II. McGrath's Argument

A belief is CONTROVERSIAL if it is denied by someone, and you have no more reason to think that they are in error than that you are.

controversial ≠ CONTROVERSIAL.

P1 Our controversial moral beliefs are CONTROVERSIAL
P2 CONTROVERSIAL beliefs are not knowledge.
C Our controversial beliefs are not knowledge.

They may still be true, and rational or justified.

Why think (P2) is true?

Alice and the train time example.

If your belief is CONTROVERSIAL, it's not safe! *You* could've easily been the one with the false belief.

It's like learning that one of your two clocks has stopped.

Why think (P1) is true?

Note: unlike other authors, this idea is robust even if you're not quite equal.

Analogy: example of unique green.

In this case, there my well be some experts. But (1) *they* don't have reason to think they're experts, so can't know. And (2) We have no good way of identifying them!

Remember Nguyen, Cognitive Islands!

Morality is similar, McGrath says. People's judgment about which moral premises to accept is immediate and intuitive, like judgments about unique green.

Even if some of us are getting it right, given that we disagree, we have no way of knowing!

III. McGrath and Elga

Elga would deny (P1). Recall Ann and Beth, who disagree on abortion.   → they don't take each other to be peers!

Reply: bracketing off *all* their related disagreements, which do they expect to be more likely to be right?

Elga: there's no fact of the matter!

Opinion of Jennifer Lopez, bracketing off knowledge that earth exists?

McGrath: much more moral agreement than Elga makes out. Both Ann and Beth are in a broadly liberal-democratic society. Individual rights, democracy, etc.

So who's right, Elga or McGrath? If we're conciliationists, must we be skeptics? Discuss!