

21. Descartes 1641: Skepticism

Kevin Dorst
kevindorst@pitt.edu

PHIL 1460

I. Skepticism

Skepticism: We don't know anything about the external world.

We obviously have lots of *beliefs* about the external world. The question is whether they amount to knowledge.

We're used to the routine process of checking whether *individual* beliefs are knowledge.

Descartes expands this: wants to *systematically* investigate whether large classes of beliefs amount to knowledge.

Strategy? Look at the reliability of the methods (or bases, or "principles") underlying our beliefs.

Beliefs about the external world? Their basis is *perception*.

Obviously perception *can* be unreliable. Does that fact on its own lead us to skepticism?

No: if we are able to distinguish the cases where reliable vs. not, then can restrict our beliefs to the "good cases".

To show that we don't know that p , we need to come up with a **skeptical scenario** for p —a scenario that we cannot rule out *even in the best-case scenario*, but which is incompatible with p .

II. The Argument

Focus on the *best* best-case scenario—one such that if we can know anything at all, we can know that.

Let $p =$ *there is a hand in front of me*.

But what if I'm a brain in a vat?¹ Despite all my evidence, it seems I can't rule out that possibility. (I'd have all the same experiences if was.) And this seems to threaten my knowledge.

How to make this into a precise argument?

We need to make sure our skeptical scenario is *incompatible* with p , so let a **BIV** be a (handless) brain in a vat, stimulated to have experiences like the ones I have.

External world = world beyond our own (present) conscious experience.

Or maybe: whether they are justified.

I don't think I need gas. But then I get worried about my trip tomorrow, so I check the gas gauge.

Far-away tower; Muller-Lyer lines.

E.g. gas light reliable so long as no "warning" light is on.

¹Or dreaming, or deceived by an evil demon.

The Argument:

P₁ I can know that: if there's a hand in front of me, then I'm not in a handless BIV.

P₂ Therefore, if I can know that there's a hand in front of me, then I can know that I'm not in a handless BIV.

P₃ But I *can't* know that I'm not a handless BIV.

C Therefore, I can't know that there's a hand in front of me.

The argument is valid. So if we want to reject the conclusion, we have to reject one of the premises.

P₁ is pretty much true just by (my awareness of) the definition.

P₂ follows from P₁ given that you can (always!) extend your knowledge via inference, i.e. come to know the logical consequences of what you know.

P₃ seems to follow from the fact that my experiences would be exactly the same if I were a handless BIV.

Q: Discuss!

Definition + logic

From P₁, via "Closure" of knowledge. If you know that p implies q , then if you know p , you can come to know q .

Nozick will reject P₂.

Lewis and Stein will reject P₃. Sorta.