24. Stine 1976 on Closure and Skepticism

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I. Skepticism and Closure

Closure: What you know is "closed" under known logical implication. If you know *if p, then q*, then if you know *p*, you also (can) know *q*.   Schematically: $K(p \rightarrow q) \rightarrow (Kp \rightarrow Kq)$.

Equivalently, $(Kp \ \& \ K(p \rightarrow q)) \rightarrow Kq$.

Closure allows us to make the following (anti-skeptical) argument:

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

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

From P1, via Closure

P3 You know that it's a zebra.

C Therefore, you know that it's not a cleverly-disguised mule.

The skeptic turns this argument on its head:

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

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

From P1, via Closure

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

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

Both are valid, so to decide between the conclusions we must know which premises to accept/reject.

Why both valid? Compare:

If it's raining, then the streets are wet.
It's raining.
Therefore, the streets are wet.

If it's raining, then the streets are wet.
The streets are *not* wet.
Therefore, it's *not* raining.

Nozick rejects Closure, and therefore denies P2.

Stine's reply: is this actually plausible?

In contexts in which we accept P3' (deny C), it seems like we also want to accept C' (deny P3). In contexts in which we accept P3 (deny C'), it seems like we also want to accept C (deny P3').

Can see this with *abominable conjunctions* (DeRose 1995):

> ?? "I know it's a zebra, but I can't rule out the possibility that it's not a zebra and is instead a cleverly-disguised mule."
> ?? "I don't know it's not a cleverly disguised mule, but I know it's a zebra (which, of course, means it's not a mule)."

Compare: ✓"I don't know it's not a cleverly disguised mule, but I know it *looks* like a zebra."

II. Equivocation?

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

But what the relevant alternatives to *p* are is fixed by the *speakers* and their *context*, rather than by the sentences ("*p*") they're using.

In some (skeptical) contexts, it being a cleverly-disguised mule is a relevant alternative to it being a zebra; but in most (normal) contexts, it's not relevant.

Regardless, 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: argument that you shouldn't keep your money at a bank.

P1* Banks are often flooded by their rivers.
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.

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.

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

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

Moreover it's perfectly legitimate (and normal) to use "know" in the latter way!
→ That is, it's sometimes okay to ignore an alternative (label it "irrelevant") *even when we have no evidence against it*.

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

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

Q: Is this convincing?

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.