

An Argument against Skepticism

Kazuyoshi Kamiyama, Ibaraki / Japan

1. The Skeptical Argument

Consider the following skeptical argument, made popular by Nozick (1981). Let $p =$ I have hands, $q =$ I'm not a bodiless brain in a vat who is programmed to have precisely the sensory experiences I've had (henceforth a BIV) and $K =$ I know that... . The skeptic argues as follows:

- (1) p (assumption for reductio)
 (2) $(p \rightarrow q)$ (Note that having hands implies being not a handless BIV.)
 (3) $(x)(y)[\{Kx \wedge K(x \rightarrow y)\} \rightarrow Ky]$
 (the closure principle)
 So (4) Kq (from (1),(2) and (3))
 But (5) $\neg Kq$ (skeptic's premise)
 So (6) $\neg Kp$ (from (1), (4) and (5))

The conclusion is that I don't know that I have hands. By analogous reasoning, the skeptic says that I don't know that I have legs, etc. (I owe this presentation of the skeptical argument to Garrett (1999).)

The above argument can be put in the following form.

- (7) $\neg Kq$ (skeptic's premise)
 (8) $\neg Kq \rightarrow \neg Kp$ (which is true under (2) and (3))
 So (9) $\neg Kp$ (by Modus Ponens)

DeRose (1995) calls it the "argument from ignorance"(AI). Let us represent the skeptical argument in this simpler form.

Dretske (1970) and Nozick (1981) attack (3) which is known as the "closure principle". It says that knowledge is closed under known logical implication; for any proposition x and y , if one knows that x and knows that x entails y , then one knows y . Their strategy is to resist skepticism by denying closure. Unfortunately there are some persuasive criticisms against them (Stine (1975), Forbes (1984), Vogel (1990), DeRose (1995), Lewis (1996)). For example, Nozick uses a counterfactual analysis of knowledge which is not flawless (Forbes, 1984) I don't think that their criticism against closure is successful, but I think their basic strategy against skepticism (to solve the skeptical puzzle by resisting the skeptical hypotheses) is right. In this paper I will propose another anti-skeptical argument. My claim is that we can escape from skepticism whether closure is true or not. In other words, we do not need to determine whether closure is true or not for resisting skepticism.

2. An Argument against Skepticism

Closure is true or not true. If closure is not true, we can escape from skepticism as Dretke and Nozick tell us. Let us consider the other case that closure is true. In this case we can use a part of the above skeptical argument; from (1) to (4). Let us write it again.

- (1) Kp
 (2) $K(p \rightarrow q)$
 (3) $(x)(y)[\{Kx \wedge K(x \rightarrow y)\} \rightarrow Ky]$
 (the closure principle)
 So (4) Kq

In this argument the closure principle transmits knowledge Kp to another Kq as in AI the closure principle transmitting ignorance $\neg Kq$ to another ignorance $\neg Kp$. Let us call the above argument the "argument from knowledge"(AK). In the present case (3) (closure principle) is true. So we can focus on the truth of (1) ((2) seems indisputable). Is it true? Do I know that I have hands?

The truth of (1) depends on the definition of knowledge. There are lots of analyses of "I know that p " after Gettier (1963). Their purpose is first to escape the so-called Gettier's paradox and second to capture our ordinary use of the words "to know." It seems natural to require the following for the analysis of knowledge.

- (H) Any analysis of knowledge should make at least that "I know that I have hands" is true.

We would not accept the analysis of knowledge that does not satisfy (H). Of course, (1) is true under the definitions of "to know" that satisfies (H). Therefore (4) is true under the same condition, which means (7) in AI is not true under it. So AI can also be rejected in this case. Therefore, we also do not need to accept the skeptical conclusion in this case.

3. What the Above Argument Shows and What It Does Not

It shows that we can escape from skepticism under a natural requirement for knowledge. It does not show that I know I'm not a BIV. It shows just that *if closure is true then I can say that I know I'm not a BIV under the wide range of notions of knowledge.*

Closure was a tool for epistemologists. Gettier (1963) used it in his argument for his paradox (according to him, justification is closed under justified entailment: for any proposition p , if S is justified in believing p and p entails q and S deduces q from p and accepts q as a result of this deduction, then S is justified in believing q). Afterwards skeptics have used it for arguing against them. So closure is used by both non-skeptics and skeptics. I used this fact in my argument against skepticism. Many non-skeptics such as relevant alternatives theorists admit the flaws of closure and use its restricted version (for any relevant alternative q to a proposition p , if one knows that p and knows that p entails not- q , then one knows that not- q . Roth and Ross (1990), p.6). I think we don't need such concession to skepticism for arguing against it.

What makes AI plausible? I think AI should be read as follows: *If "to know" satisfies (7) and (8), then (9) is true under the meaning of "to know."* Which means that the notion of knowledge does not satisfy (H)("I know that I have hands" is false under the notion). So in AI "I know that p " means, for example, that I can exclude all logical possibilities of not- p . Therefore "I don't know that I have

hands" means that I cannot exclude all *logical possibilities* that I don't have hands. I think this does not contradict our intuition. It is logically possible that I am a brain in a vat, merely dreaming, or being deceived by an evil demon.*

* I am grateful to John Gibbons for his suggestive lecture of epistemology at MIT in the fall of 2000.

Literature

- DeRose, K. 1995 "Solving the Skeptical Problem", *The Philosophical Review* 104, 1-7, 17-52, reprinted in Sosa and Kim (2000), 482-502.
- Dretske, F. I. 1970 "Epistemic Operators", *The Journal of Philosophy* 67, 1007-1023.
- Forbes, G. 1984 "Nozick on Scepticism", *The Philosophical Quarterly* 34, 43-52.
- Garrett, B. 1999 "A Sceptical Tension", *Analysis* 59, 205-206.
- Gettier, E. L. 1963 "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" *Analysis* 23, 121-3.
- Lewis, D. 1996 "Elusive Knowledge", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74, 549-567.
- Nozick, R. 1981 *Philosophical Explanations*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Roth M.D. and Ross, G. (eds.) 1990 *Doubting: Contemporary Perspectives on Skepticism*, Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Sosa, E. and Kim, J. (eds) 2000 *Epistemology - An Anthology*, Malden: Blackwell.
- Stine, G.C. 1976 "Skepticism, Relevant Alternatives, and Deductive Closure", *Philosophical Studies* 29, 249-261.
- Vogel, J. 1990 "Are There Counterexamples to the Closure Principle?" in Roth and Ross (1990), 13-27.