

Philosophy 311: Knowledge and Justification

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Handout 11: Skepticism

Skeptics claim that we don't know or have justification to believe various things that we ordinarily think that we do.

Force of a skeptical claim = what epistemic status it says we don't have (knowledge, justified belief, evidence, etc.)

Scope of a skeptical claim = what range of beliefs the claim targets (beliefs about the external world, beliefs about the future, beliefs about things we haven't observed)

Skeptics don't say that the relevant beliefs are *false*, just that they're not *known* (etc.)

E.g., atheists are not skeptics (in the relevant sense) about the existence of God

Two arguments that we don't know much (if anything) about the external world:

Possibility of error (Feldman 114-115)

1. For almost any of your beliefs about the external world, that belief could be mistaken
2. If your belief that p could be mistaken, then you don't know that p
3. So, you know almost nothing about the external world

Certainty (Feldman 117)

1. If you know that p, then you're absolutely certain that p.
2. You're not absolutely certain of anything about the external world.
3. So, you know nothing about the external world.

An argument that you *can't* know much (if anything) about the external world.

Indistinguishability (Feldman 115-117)

Fallible evidence for p = evidence you could have even if p were false.

Case A and case B are *introspectively indistinguishable* for a subject when, from the subject's own point of view, case A and case B seem exactly alike.

1. If you can know p on the basis of fallible evidence, then you can know p even though you're in a state that's introspectively indistinguishable from a state where you don't know p.
2. You can't know p if you're in a state that's introspectively indistinguishable from a state where you don't know p.
3. So, you can't know p on the basis of fallible evidence.
4. All the evidence we have for any proposition about the external world is fallible.
5. So, you can't know anything about the external world.

(Next week: "Transmissibility" argument, Feldman 118-119)

Responses:

Skepticism is self-refuting

Skeptical arguments don't imply that skepticism is *false*.
They imply (perhaps) that skepticism *can't be known to be true*.
But so what?

Moorean response

Doesn't explain why the arguments *seem* good

Fallibilism

Fallibilism is the view that you can know things on the basis of fallible evidence.

Since fallible evidence can't make you absolutely certain, fallibilism implies that premise (1) of the Certainty argument is false.

Since it's possible for you to have all of your fallible evidence for p even though p is false, fallibilism suggests that premise (2) of the Possibility of Error argument is false.

Also since it's possible for you to have all of your fallible evidence for p even though p is false, fallibilism suggests that premise (2) of the Indistinguishability argument is false.

But even if fallibilism is correct, why are we so easily fooled into thinking that it's not? Why do those premises seem true?