

Phil. 270: Tuesday, 4/14/20: Stine's Contextualist Moorean Approach to Skepticism

Simple Regular, old "Argument from Ignorance" (AI):

- 1s. You don't know that you're not a BIV
- 2s. If you don't know that you're not a BIV, then you don't know that you have hands
- So, C. You don't know that you have hands

Adjusted, Somewhat More Complicated AI:

- 1c. You don't know that you're not a BIV, and you can't come to know that you're not a BIV by deducing that you are not one from the claim that you have hands
- 2c. If you knew that you have hands, then, if you didn't already know that you're not a BIV, you would be able to come to know that you're not a BIV by competently deducing it from your supposed knowledge that you have hands.
- So, C. You don't know that you have hands

Single-premise closure principles:

$K(p) \ \& \ p \Rightarrow q \quad K(q)$
 $K(p) \ \& \ CD(p \rightarrow q) \quad K(q)$

Why simple AI seems (is) intuitively plausible: 2s looks like it's based on (is an instance of) the top closure principle, which principle is clearly wrong. To get a version of AI's second premise that is instead an instance of the better closure principle on the bottom, we have to weaken 2s to 2c. But then, to make up for the weakening of our "bridge," premise, we have to strengthen our "base" premise, and change 1s to 1c. **But** when even Simple AI is presented to someone, we can presume that they are aware of the BIV alternative to their having hands, and can see that their having hands implies that that alternative is false; we can thus presume that if they can come to know \sim BIV by deducing it from HANDS, they'd have done so. 2s can be based on the better bottom closure principle, together with these things we are in a position to presume. When we judge that we don't know that \sim BIV (to the extent that we go along with the skeptic's first premise, in its simple form), we do so while presuming that we would know that \sim BIV by deduction from HANDS if that were possible. Our judgment that 1s is true is made against a background in which 1c has to be true for 1s to be.

Stine, "Skepticism, Relevant Alternatives, and Deductive Closure"

-**Review:** RA, Contextualism, and Skepticism: points 2, 5, and 6 on the 1/28 handout

-**Background,** and Stine's over-arching goal: Stine associates the "RA view" with (among others) Dretske and Goldman (she knew of "DPK" in advance of its publication: see the middle of her note 1). Probably because of its association with Dretske (who like Nozick thought the key to answering the skeptic was denying closure), she thought it had been employed as a closure-denying answer to skepticism. This she thought was a mistake. She thought RA provided an answer (the best we could have) to skepticism, but it was one that upheld closure. This led her to pioneer (what we can anachronistically call) Contextualist Mooreanism.

-Stine on RA and skepticism

-What Stine calls the RA view (252.3) includes that skeptical hypotheses (she doesn't use that term) are irrelevant in normal circumstances—despite our lack of “particular evidence against them” (251.9). This is “the whole thrust of the relevant alternative position” (253.7). Her very short (and brutally blunt) answer to the skeptic (at 252.1) is just that their alternatives (skeptical hypotheses) are irrelevant. Though she softens the answer to skepticism later (see below), Stine does say at this point that this blunt reply to the skeptic is “fundamentally correct” (252.3).

-252.2: Advice on how to handle the skeptic, accompanying the brutally brief response: Turn a deaf ear to them!

-But at 254.1, “some qualifications” and nuance start creeping in: We hear that “In truth, in some sense skepticism is unanswerable” (254.2), and we can see a proto-contextualism at work: “It is an essential characteristic of our concept of knowledge that tighter criteria are appropriate in different contexts” (254.3), followed immediately by what sounds like a skeptic-friendly application of this contextualism: “It is one thing in a street encounter, another in a classroom, another in a law court – and who is to say it cannot be another in a philosophical discussion?” (254.4). But Stine then turns against the skeptic: While they are “play[ing] on” (254.7) on an essential feature of our concept of knowledge, and they “rightly” have an “entering wedge,” the standards they are trying to install are “perverse” (254.6)!

-What we have is a basic contextualist answer to skepticism: We do know by ordinary standards; we don't know by the standards the skeptic is trying to get us to accept. The skeptic is right by the standards they are promoting, but is wrong that this shows we've been mistaken in our ordinary claims to “know”, “if he holds that others are wrong in any way - i.e., are sloppy, speaking only loosely, or whatever - when they say we know a great deal” (254.7). Stine adds to this basic contextualist stance her opinion about the nature of the skeptic's standards: they are perverse. We should not accept them. Turn a deaf ear, still, I suppose – but while realizing that “in some sense” the skeptic is right and “unanswerable.”

-Note how talk of RA doesn't appear in this exposition of Stine's basic contextualist position. To add it in: For Stine, the perversity of the skeptic's standards for knowledge are a matter of their allowing perverse and usually irrelevant alternatives to count as relevant.

-What then becomes of **Closure**?

-Stine proposes that we can maintain closure from within a Relevant Alternatives theory of knowledge if we “hold the set of relevant alternatives constant from beginning to end of the deductive closure argument” (pp. 255-6).

-Stine's point holds for contextualist accounts of knowledge attributions generally: If we're operating with a contextualist theory, we should hold the content of “knows” constant. To switch standards midway is to “commit some logical sin akin to equivocation” (p. 256.5). Closure can then be maintained at any given standard for knowledge.

-What then becomes of the skeptical argument (AI)? Stine pioneers the contextualist Moorean account, of a type followed by Cohen, Lewis, and KDR, on which

-a) we know that O by ordinary standards for knowledge, but closure is maintained because by those same ordinary standards we also know that not-H

-b) the skeptic's bringing H up pushes us toward* the very high (perhaps "extreme", "perverse") standards for knowledge according to which we don't know that O – but closure is maintained here, too, for at these high standards, we also don't know that not-H

-c) (b) explains why the skeptic is as persuasive as they are, and the skeptic may* end up speaking truthfully when they conclude that we 'don't know' that O. But since their "success" (insofar as they do succeed) is achieved by raising the standards for 'knows', they are wrong if they then go on to conclude that others, speaking in non-skeptical contexts, are wrong (speaking or thinking falsely) when they claim to 'know' this or that.

-*not clear what to say about cases where the skeptic encounters determined resistance. If a determined, "Moorean" exclaims in response: "How absurd it is to suggest that I do not know O, but only believe it, and that perhaps it is not the case!", who is speaking the truth?

-Stine on evidence and knowledge_o that skeptical hypotheses are false

-But what's up with that knowledge-by-ordinary standards that H is false (second half of (a))?

-the notion of evidence plays a large role in Stine's thought from the beginning of this piece—in a way that I haven't brought out yet. She seems conflicted about this key issue: Do we know [by ordinary standards: in the way Stine thinks we do "know" this] by means of evidence that skeptical hypotheses are false?

-early on, as I noted, Stine says that we don't have "particular evidence" against skeptical hypotheses (251.9). But what does she mean by this? Do we not have any evidence against them at all? And might we come to know_o that they are false via this (non-particular?) evidence?

-Stine seems to have some kind of eye on global (not her term) skeptical hypotheses (not her term), extremely "perverse" though they be: see the mention of the "evil genius" at 254.6). But the bulk of her attention is spent on the more "local" painted mules hypothesis.

-She takes what has become the standard Contextualist Moorean line: "I do know that it is not a mule painted to look like a zebra" (258.6). By this, I take it, she means that she knows it by ordinary standards. But how does she know it – by evidence or not? Though she seriously considers the "possible alternative view" on which ~CPM is known_o by evidence (258.8-259.5), her favored account is what immediately follows her declaration of knowledge: she knows it without need of evidence:

I do not need evidence for such a proposition. The evidence picture of knowledge has been carried too far. I would say that I do not have evidence that it is a zebra, either. I simply see that it is one. But that is perhaps another matter. The point I want to make here is simply that if the negation of a proposition is not a relevant alternative, then I know it - obviously, without needing to provide evidence - and so obviously that it is odd, misleading even, to give utterance to my knowledge. (258.7)

-For Stine, we *can appear* not to know that skeptical hypotheses are false because “to say that [someone] knows that p does normally presuppose that not-p is a relevant alternative.” This would imply that an attempt to say “I know that’s not a CPM” would tend to backfire: it would tend to create a (perverse?) conversation situation where the animal’s being a CPM is a relevant alternative, and since it can’t be ruled out, the claim to “knowledge” would go false. (If Stine were to expand her principle to the claim that saying either that someone does know *or saying that they don’t know* that p tends to presuppose that not-p is a relevant alternative, then she could also use this account to say how the skeptic’s claim that “You don’t know that it isn’t a cpm” would tend to go true.)

-Stine continues that “This is, however, a pragmatic, not a semantic presupposition....Thus, the presupposition falls in the category of those which Grice labels ‘cancellable’” (255.8). I don’t know if we want to get into all that terminology. Suffice it to say, we do know that not-H by ordinary standards; we know this without any need of evidence; and the reason we seem not to know it is that a claim to the effect that we do “know” it tends to create a context where that claim goes false (and an admission that one “doesn’t know” it tends to go true, for parallel reasons – though here we’re going a bit beyond Stine).

-Following Stine, there is something of a split among CM-eans (the “Stine crowd”), with Lewis seeming to follow Stine in saying we know_o that skeptical hypotheses are false by taking it for granted that they are false, with no need for evidence, but Cohen and KDR saying we know *a priori* that not-H where H is a “global” skeptical hypothesis (like BIV), but that we know the likes of “that animal is not a cleverly painted mule” on the basis of empirical evidence which seems insufficient for knowledge, but in fact gives us knowledge-by-ordinary-standards.

Next Time: Reading 18