

Phil. 270: 4/23/19: Reading 18: Solving the Skeptical Problem

Objective: to “defeat” the “bold skeptic”

-the “bold skeptic” is one who claims/concludes that our ordinary claims to (and ordinary thoughts to the effect that we have) “knowledge” are wrong: pp. 5.7-6.1.

-When presented with the possibility of contextualism, the skeptic may opt to remain a bold skeptic, and can plausibly take AI to establish bold skepticism, if its premises are not just true, but “boldly true”: true when evaluated even at ordinary standards for knowledge. I, like other contextualists, follow Stine in accepting the bold truth of premise 2: It is true at any standard for knowledge, just keep the standard constant. It’s premise 1 that I think will fail to be boldly true. But it can seem to be boldly true, as I admit (highlighted part) below:

The contextualist strategy is important because AI initially seems to threaten the truth of our ordinary claims—it threatens to boldly show that we’ve been wrong all along in thinking and saying that we know this and that. For it doesn’t seem as if it’s just in some “high” or “philosophical” sense that AI’s premises are true: They seem true in the ordinary sense of ‘know’. In fact, **one is initially tempted to say that there’s no good sense in which I know that I’m not a BIV** or in which I can know I have hands if I don’t know that I’m not a BIV. How (and whether) to avoid the bold skeptical result is puzzle enough. (18: pp. 5-6)

-“defeat”: by explaining how the skeptical argument has the power it has in such a way that renders it unthreatening to the truth of our ordinary claims to “know,” we seek to show how the best “enlightened Moorean choice” [15, pp. 46-49, discussed on 4/7] we can make is for our “Contextualist Moorean” solution, over the other solutions, including that of the “bold skeptic.”

Nozick and Stine: Prospects and Problems

-Nozick fails to explain away the power of the intuitively powerful claim he rejects, AI’s second premise: 18, pp. 28-29; leaving us “with little reason to follow Nozick in choosing to take an implausible stand precisely where he has rather than someplace else” (18: p. 29.2). Nozick on this matter is now more nicely presented (with substantiating passages in the notes) at pp. 203-204 of *The Appearance of Ignorance*:

To quickly review Nozick’s own treatment of AI and my complaints about it: Nozick denies AI’s second premise. He admits the plausibility of what he’s denying. In fact, he likens the closure principle on which this premise could be based, in terms of its “intuitive appeal,” to a steamroller.² But following the positive explanatory methodology I ascribed to him above, he denies it because his account of knowledge rules that it is false.³ So, to now ask the question that vexes negative explainers like me: What then leads us so very badly astray about closure and AI’s second premise? It’s here that Nozick offers nothing, simply leaving that explanatory task to “further exploration.”⁴ As I complained in SSP (Section 1.9), this leaves us with little reason to follow Nozick in denying just the piece of the puzzle he chooses to deny.

2. “Uncovering difficulties in the details of particular formulations of [closure principle] P will not weaken the principle’s intuitive appeal; such quibbling will seem at best like a wasp attacking a steamroller, at worst like an effort in bad faith to avoid being pulled along by the skeptic’s argument” (Nozick 1981: 206).

3. “Principle P is wrong, however, and not merely in detail. Knowledge is not closed under known logical implication. S knows that p when S has a true belief that p, and S wouldn’t have a false belief that p (condition 3) and S would have a true belief that p (condition 4). Neither of these latter two conditions is closed under known logical implication” (Nozick 1981: 206).

4. “Thus, if our notion of knowledge was as strong as we naturally tend to think (namely, closed under known logical implication) then the skeptic would be right. (But why do we naturally think this? Further exploration and explanation is needed of the intuitive roots of the natural assumption that knowledge is closed under known logical implication)” (Nozick 1981: 242).

-On the other hand, as we’ve discussed more than once, Nozick does provide a wonderfully effective explanation of the intuitive power of AI’s first premise—what I call in 18 the “Subjunctive Conditionals Account.” I try to convey the power of this account esp. in sect. 8 (pp. 23.9-27.2) of 18

-By contrast, Stine provides an attractive account of how closure and a sensible, positive stance toward AI’s second premise can be maintained in an account that rejects bold skepticism, as we saw last time....

-But Stine’s account, made from within the RA theory, doesn’t have a satisfying account of the intuitive power of AI’s first premise. Why is that premise so plausible? The skeptic somehow makes H a relevant alternative, or at least pushes toward making it such. But why would that block “knowledge” of O? RA’s answer comes down to: we can’t rule out or eliminate H, or can’t discriminate O from H, or etc. But does that really explain things?: 18, pp. 16-17.5. Once we see the power of SCA, we can see that it’s the kind of account Stine was striving toward (in her use of, e.g., “particular evidence,” as we discussed last time)

-Stine & Nozick: the strength of each corresponds to the weakness of the other. Maybe there’s some way of putting them together! We need a solution that explains the intuitive power of both of AI’s premises (& also the plausibility of our ordinary claims to knowledge)

*****key-but-tricky part: SSP’s account of why insensitive beliefs seem not to be instances of knowledge**, based on a contextualist “double-safety” account of knowledge and the “Rule of Sensitivity” (36.3; put in terms of possible worlds at 36.7-37.2): When AI’s first premise (I don’t know that I’m not a BIV) is presented, by the Rule of Sensitivity, the sphere of epistemically relevant worlds is expanded to include the nearest worlds in which I am a BIV. In those nearest BIV-worlds, now made relevant, I am a BIV but falsely think I am not one, so I don’t count as knowing that I’m not a BIV at the standards for knowledge that have just been installed. I also don’t count as knowing that I have hands at those newly installed standards, for in those nearest BIV worlds, now made relevant, I’m mistaken about whether I have hands: I don’t have any, but (because I’m a BIV or the relevant kind) I believe that I do. So the skeptic has installed standards I don’t satisfy for both I’m not a BIV and I have hands. Here’s how this goes down, on one pass, at pp. 37-38 of SSP:

In utilizing AI to attack our putative knowledge of O, the skeptic instinctively chooses her skeptical hypothesis, H, so that it will have these two features: (1) We will be in at least as strong a position to know that not-H as we’re in to know that O, but (2) Any belief we might have to the effect that not-H will be an insensitive belief (a belief we would hold even if not-H were false—that is, even if H were true).

Given feature (2), the skeptic's assertion that we don't know that not-H, by the Rule of Sensitivity, drives the standards for knowledge up to such a point as to make that assertion true. By the Rule of Sensitivity, recall, the standards for knowledge are raised to such a level as to require our belief that not-H to be sensitive before it can count as knowledge. Since our belief that not-H isn't sensitive (feature (2)), the standards are driven up to such a level that we don't count as knowing that not-H. And since we're in no stronger an epistemic position with respect to 0 than we're in with respect to not-H (feature (1)), then, at the high standards put in place by the skeptic's assertion of Al's first premise, we also fail to know that 0. At these high standards, the skeptic truthfully asserts her second premise (which, recall, is also true at lower standards), and then truthfully asserts Al's conclusion that we don't know that 0.³⁵ This accounts for the persuasiveness of Al. But since, on this account, the skeptic gets to truthfully state her conclusion only by raising the standards for knowledge, Al doesn't threaten the truth of our ordinary claims to know the very Os our knowledge of which the skeptic attacks. For the fact that the skeptic can install very high standards that we don't live up to has no tendency to show that we don't satisfy the more relaxed standards that are in place in more ordinary conversations and debates.

-compare with Nozick's account: both utilize SCA, but differ over why SCA's generalization holds; on Nozick's account, you *simply* don't know that \sim BIV. On the SSP account, you don't know that \sim BIV by the very standards that an admission that you don't "know" that tend to put into place.

-as on the RA account, we can say that on the SSP account certain (outlandish) and usually-irrelevant possibilities are made (or push toward being made) relevant. But the crucial difference is in how this kills knowledge of O: at this point, the SSP account doesn't appeal to anything like that *we can't rule out* these possibilities, or *can't discern* that they don't obtain, or etc. (all based on phrases of epistemic appraisal that seem pretty close to saying that we don't know that the possibilities don't obtain). Rather, in the closest worlds where these possibilities obtain, this is what's going on: We (still) believe that they are false. In short, the SSP account is able to use SCA where the Relevant Alternativist appeals to something like "ruling out."

The resulting contextualist solution to the skeptical puzzle:

-what it says about 1, 2, and \sim C:

-2 is boldly true, true at any particular standard for knowledge but hold the standards constant!: the Stine attitude toward closure

-1 is true at the skeptic's high standards: this accounts for its plausibility (how?). But it's false at ordinary standards for knowledge: we do know_o that \sim BIV

- \sim C: false at the skeptic's high standards (so C is true there), but true (we do know!) at ordinary standards: recall the basic contextualist strategy

How this solution compares with the “straightforward” (non-contextualist) non-skeptical solutions

- For a “straightforward” (non-contextualist) solution, a satisfying solution will take the form of picking which of the three plausible claims (the skeptic’s premises and the denial of her conclusion) to deny (so far, that’s just making a Moorean choice), but also explaining why this false claim seems so plausible to us – one “explains away” the plausibility of the claim
- but middle of p. 42: straightforward solvers (as we saw in the case of Nozick) tend to just deny a premise w/o accounting for its plausibility
- the exception being certain presentations of bold skepticism. So we look at: the SSP Contextualist Solution vs. the “bold skeptical” solution
 - bold skeptic’s problem: p. 44.1 – 45.1
 - skeptic could “fix” it... 45.1 – 46.5
 - but then we’re left with no reason to accept her solution over the contextualist solution, and in fact good reason to accept the contextualist solution: sect. 16
 - 1st attack (in longer piece Plantinga refers to; he doesn’t mention this attack here): too picky
 - 2nd attack: “self-referentially incoherent”, mentioned at p. 44.4, explained at 49.7.
- Plantinga’s “alvinizing” claim: belief in God (can be? Is for many?) properly basic

Next time: starting Readings 19-21