PHL232 Handout 1: Scepticism

§1 Knowledge vs. True Belief

Beliefs can be false, but knowledge must be true: knowledge is *factive*. But what is the difference between knowledge and true belief? The question goes back to Plato:

> For true opinion, as long as they remain, are a fine thing and all they do is good, but they are not willing to remain long, and they escape from a man's mind, so they are not worth much until one ties them down by (giving) an account of the reason why. (*Meno* 98a)

> Then suppose a jury has been justly persuaded of some matter which only an eye-witness could know, and which cannot otherwise be known; suppose they come to their decision upon hearsay, forming a true judgment: then they have decided the case without knowledge (*Theaetetus* 210b-c)

Plato's answer – that knowledge is true belief with an account (*logos*) – is a precursor to the JTB analysis of knowledge: S knows that p if and only if (1) S believes that p, (2) p is true, and (3) S's belief that p is justified.

Aside: Necessary and Sufficient Conditions

An analysis of knowledge states necessary (but jointly sufficient) conditions for S to know that p.

Some technical vocabulary:
-A is a *necessary condition* for B $=_{def}$ B is not the case unless A is the case (we say: 'B only if A'; or 'if B then A').
-A is a *sufficient condition* for B $=_{def}$ if A is the case then B is the case (we say: 'A only if B'; or 'if A then B').
-A is *equivalent* to B $=_{def}$ A is both necessary and sufficient for B (we say: 'A iff B'; or 'A just if B'; or 'A if and only if B').

Another way to understand necessary and sufficient conditions is in terms of the semantics for the material conditional (i.e. the logical connective expressed by 'if…then…'). Briefly: when A → B, A is a sufficient condition for B. When B → A, in contrast, we have the opposite result: A is a necessary condition for B. Compare §3.1.3 of the logic handout.

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§2 Varieties of Scepticism

Sceptics deny our claims to know. Sceptics about morality deny that we know moral truths; sceptics about mathematics deny that we know mathematical truths; and sceptics about the external world deny that we know truths about the world.

More generally, *scepticism* about a given class of propositions is the view that, for any proposition p in the class, and any thinking subject S, 'S knows that p' is always false.

Our primary focus will be external world scepticism.

§3 Argument from Sceptical Hypotheses

§3.1 Intuitive Statement

Descartes provided a model for scepticism to follow. Given any ordinary claim about the world – that I have hands, or that there are sixty students in this class – he observed that there is a way the world could be such that everything would look the same to us but the claim would be false.

> *Sceptical Scenarios:* While happily snug in bed I could undergo a dream in which I teach a class of sixty students. Or (what would be way worse) I could be a disembodied brain floating in a vat of fluid whose experiences are the products of subtle manipulation by vindictive scientists.

A sceptical hypothesis is any claim to the effect that one of these sceptical scenarios obtains. If I know that I have hands, however, I should also be in a position to know that I'm not a brain in vat, since knowledge is factive and brains in vats don't have hands. Yet sceptical hypotheses are designed so as to be compatible with all of my actual (or potential) evidence: no matter how much evidence I gather, I'll never be in a position to know that I'm not in a sceptical scenario. So all my ordinary claims to knowledge are false.

§3.2 Precise Statement
Let q be the denial of a sceptical hypothesis (e.g. the hypothesis that we are brains in vats), and let p be some ordinary proposition about the world (e.g. that I have hands).
1. I know that if p then q (e.g. if I have hands, I am not a brains in a vat)
2. I do not know that q [*Sceptical Premiss*]
3. If I know that if p then q, then if I know that p then I know that q [*Closure Principle*]
4. So if I knows that p then I know that q [from 1 and 3]
5. Therefore, I do not know that p [from 2 and 4]

Given that we can substitute just about any proposition about the world for p, this argument seems to undermine my claim to know any truths about the external world.

§3.3 Validity and Soundness
A good deductive argument will be both valid and sound. An argument is *valid* iff it is impossible for all of the premisses to be true and the conclusion false. An argument is *sound* iff it is valid and all of its premisses are true.

The argument from sceptical hypotheses is valid. To see why, try to understand why 4 is true if 1 and 3 are true, and 5 is true if 2 and 4 are true. *Hint*: look at the truth table for the conditional in the logic primer (§3.1.3).

If we cannot contest the argument's validity, we must contest its soundness. But 4 and 5 follow from earlier premisses, so the argument is unsound only if one of 1-3 is false

§3.4 Significance of Scepticism
Scepticism is important not because we think it is true, but because it provides a constraint on our accounts of knowledge. A right account of knowledge should provide the means to resist the sceptic's argument.

§4 The Moorean Shift
Jim Pryor (2000) sees in Moore a distinction between two anti-sceptical projects (see also Sosa's distinction between Particularism and Methodism):

        Ambitious: refute the sceptic with arguments whose premisses a sceptic would accept

        Modest: establish to *our* satisfaction that we can know things.

The Modest project tries to salvage as many of our pre-theoretical beliefs as possible, yet diffuse any sceptical arguments that begin from premises we accept.

Moore develops an anti-sceptical argument that looks like an expression of the Modest project.

His argument takes as a premiss the denial of 5. He says that 'I have a hand' is true, and that it is known to be true (albeit without proof). Given the denial of 5, Moore can reject 2 (compare: 'I have conclusive evidence that I am awake'). This move – from the denial of 5 to the denial of 2 – has come to be known as the *Moorean Shift*.

        A good question: does knowledge require proof? If it doesn't, does Moore's argument work?