

# Skepticism

**Intro Epistemology, Week 2**

# Skepticism

- **Skepticism about the Future:** We do not know anything about what will happen in the future.
- **Inductive Skepticism:** We do not know any general facts.
- **Skepticism about Other Minds:** We do not know anything about what other people think or feel.
- **External World Skepticism:** We do not know anything about the world outside of our minds, including whether such a world even exists.
- **Pyrrhonian Skepticism:** We do not know anything at all.
- **Skepticism about X:** We do not know anything about X.

# Skepticism

We know *almost* nothing

# Skepticism

Descartes' First Meditation can be **reconstructed** as an argument for Skepticism. In fact there are two different ways to do that:

- Closure Arguments
- Good Case / Bad Case Arguments

We will first see how these argument can be used to show that you don't know you have hands. Then we will consider how they generalise.

# Closure Arguments

P1. If I knew that I have hands, then I would be in a position to know that I am not an amputee in a hospital bed, who is merely having a vivid dream of having hands.

P2. I am not in a position to know that I am not an amputee who is having a vivid dream of having hands.

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C. I do not know that I have hands

# Closure Arguments

The first premise follows from the *Closure Principle*:

If you know that  $p$ , and  $p$  deductively entails  $q$ , then you are in a position to know that  $q$ .

For example, suppose you know that *Jack is taller than Jill*. Then you are also in a position to know that *Jill is shorter than Jack*, because that can be inferred from what you know.

# Closure Arguments

Likewise, if you really know that you have hands, then you must also be in a position to know that you are not an amputee in a hospital bed who is having a vivid dream. After all, this *logically follows* from what you know.

Consequently, if you are not in a position to know this, it follows that you must not really know that you have hands either.

# Closure Arguments

We can generalise this argument strategy:

P1. If I knew  $p$ , then I would be in a position to know that I am not [ just dreaming / a disembodied spirit, deceived by an evil demon / living in a computer simulation / a brain in a vat ].

P2. I am not in a position to know that I am not [ just dreaming / a disembodied spirit, deceived by an evil demon / living in a computer simulation / a brain in a vat ].

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C. I do not know  $p$



# Closure Arguments

We can generalise this argument strategy:

P1. If I knew  $p$ , then I would be in a position to know that I am not in the **Bad Case**.

P2. I am not in a position to know that I am not in the **Bad Case**.

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C. I do not know  $p$

# Closure Arguments

Clearly, you can construe apparently compelling arguments of this kind for almost any proposition  $p$ . If we accept all these arguments as **sound**, we must conclude that we know almost nothing (and neither does anybody else).

# Good Case / Bad Case Arguments

Good Case / Bad Case arguments are based on two principles:

- **Factivity**. Whatever is known is true. (*Or*: If you know  $p$ , then  $p$ ).
- **Supervenience**. What a person knows is determined by the evidence they have. (*Or*: If two people have the same evidence, then they know the same things).

# Good Case / Bad Case Arguments

P1. If were an amputee without hands who was merely having a vivid dream of all my present experiences, then I would have the same evidence that I actually have.

P2. What a person knows is determined by their evidence

(**Supervenience**)

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C1. I know nothing that the vividly dreaming amputee does not know

# Good Case / Bad Case Arguments

P3. If I were a vividly dreaming amputee, then I would not know that I have hands (from **Factivity**)

C1. I know nothing that the vividly dreaming amputee does not know (motivated by **Supervenience**)

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C2. I do not know that I have hands

# Good Case / Bad Case Arguments

P1. In the Bad Case, I do not know  $p$  (from **Factivity**)

P2. I know nothing in the Good Case that I do not know in the Bad Case (motivated by **Supervenience**)

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C. I do not know  $p$

# Factivity

Knowledge is **factive**: whatever you know is true.

In other words, if you know that  $p$ , it follows that  $p$ .

For instance, if Jane know that it is raining, it follows that it is raining.

# Factivity

Belief is **non-factive**: what you believe need not be true.

In other words, if you believe that  $p$ , it does not follow that  $p$ .

For instance, if Jane believes that it is raining, it does not follow that it really is raining.



# Knowledge vs. True Belief

Not all true beliefs are knowledge. They can be true “by accident”, so to speak.

If I believe that Madrid is the capital of Spain because of a lucky guess, then I do not *know* that Madrid is the capital of Spain.

Unlike true belief, knowledge seems to require something else: certainty / justification / evidence...

# Arguments

An **argument** is a collection of premises that are meant to support a conclusion.

An argument is **valid** if it is impossible for the premises to be true and the conclusion false.

P1. Every country has a President  
P2. Spain is a country.  
C. Therefore, Spain has a President.

An argument is **sound** if it is valid and also has true premises.

P1. No country that has a Queen is a Republic.  
P2. The Netherlands is a country that has a Queen.  
C. Therefore, the Netherlands is not a Republic.