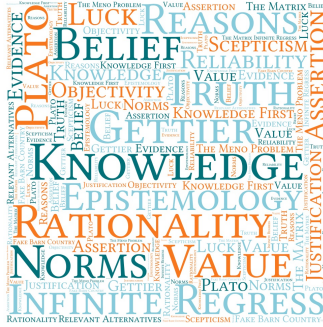




## Knowledge, Individuals & Society

JAKE CHANDLER

*Scepticism: Introduction*



## Varieties of skepticism

- A **dogmatist** wrt a particular domain  $D$  (e.g. morality, religion) is someone who believes we have knowledge wrt that domain
- A **skeptic** wrt  $D$  is someone who isn't a dogmatist wrt  $D$
- This leaves scope for two possible attitudes
  - (1) holding the view that we don't have knowledge (aka '**academic**', 'dogmatic' or 'Cartesian' skepticism)
  - (2) suspending judgment as to whether or not we have knowledge (aka '**Pyrrhonian**' skepticism)
- In what follows we focus on (1)
  - Reason 1: It's the seemingly more radical claim
  - Reason 2: Pyrrhonism might in fact just collapse into academic skepticism...

## Is Pyrrhonism tenable?

- Let  $K(P)$  = 'S knows that  $P$ ' and  $B(P)$  = 'S believes that  $P$ '
- I'll try to show: if  $S$  is rational and  $\neg B(K(P))$ , then  $B(\neg K(P))$ , i.e.  
If you don't believe you know, then you ought to believe you don't
- Some logical principles you might find compelling:
  - KNOWLEDGE NORM:**  $B(P) \Rightarrow B(K(P))$   
(If you believe  $P$ , then you believe you know  $P$ )
  - NEGATIVE INTROSPECTION:**  $\neg B(P) \Rightarrow B(\neg B(P))$   
(If you don't believe  $P$ , then you believe you don't believe  $P$ )
  - MODUS PONENS:**  $B(P)$  and  $B(P \rightarrow Q) \Rightarrow B(Q)$
  - TAUTOLOGY:**  $B$  is a logical principle  $\Rightarrow B(P)$
- We have already seen the first one (see our discussion of K-first approach)

## Is Pyrrhonism tenable? (ctd)

- So now consider this argument:
  - (1)  $\neg B(K(P))$  (assumption: Pyrrhonian Skepticism)
  - (2)  $\neg B(P)$  (from (1) and KNOWLEDGE NORM)
  - (3)  $\neg K(P)$  (from (2) and the belief requirement on knowledge)
  - (4) It is a logical truth that  $\neg B(K(P)) \rightarrow \neg K(P)$  (by conditional proof from (1) to (3))
  - (5)  $B(\neg B(K(P)) \rightarrow \neg K(P))$  (from (4) and TAUTOLOGY)
  - (6)  $B(\neg B(K(P)))$  (from (1) and NEGATIVE INTROSPECTION)

---

- (7)  $B(\neg K(P))$  (from (5) and (6): Academic Skepticism!)

## Preliminaries

---

- Here is the most well-known kind of argument for academic scepticism
- Let:
  - $O$  = Some 'ordinary' claim that you take yourself to know is true  
(Example: 'The animal in the enclosure is a zebra')
  - $H$  = Some 'sceptical' hypothesis inconsistent with  $O$ , whose truth would just as well predict your perceptual experience  
(Example: 'The animal in the enclosure is a cleverly painted mule')
- Typically, our grounds for belief fall short of entailing the truth of that belief: for most  $O$ , we have an  $H$

## The argument from ignorance

---

- Some options
  - **Scepticism**: Accept (1), accept (2) and hence accept (3)
  - **Mooreanism**: Accept (2), deny (3) and hence deny (1)
  - **Closure denialism**: Accept (1), deny (3) and hence deny (2)  
(**DEDUCTIVE CLOSURE OF KNOWLEDGE**: if one is in a position to know both that  $P$ . and  $P$  entails  $Q$ , then one is in a position to know that  $Q$ )
- Taking *any* of these options incurs an explanatory debt:
  - Scepticism: explain why (3) seems false when it is in fact true
  - Mooreanism: explain why the negation of (1) seems false when it is in fact true
  - Closure Denialism: explain why the negation of (2) seems false when it is in fact true

## The argument

---

- The classic argument for academic scepticism:
  - (1) You're not in a position to know that  $\neg H$
  - (2) If you're not in a position to know that  $\neg H$ , then you're not in a position to know that  $O$

---

  - (3) You're not in a position to know that  $O$
- The premises seem OK:
  - (1): If  $H$  were true, things would seem exactly as they do now
  - (2): It seems wrong here to claim that one is in a position to know that  $O$ , but is not in a position to know that  $\neg H$  (e.g. that one is in a position to know that the animal is a zebra but not that it isn't a cleverly painted mule)
- But the conclusion seems disconcerting!!

## How to do the explaining

---

- A popular line to take:

We are confusing the fact a statement is false with the fact that, although it is true, we nevertheless shouldn't be asserting it  
(**Warranted Assertability Manoeuvre**, aka **WAM**)
- I'll follow DeRose (1999), who clarifies the general idea by contrasting a 'good' WAM with a 'bad' one

## A candidate good WAM

---

- Assume that I've polished off *all* the cookies but tell you  
'I've eaten some of the cookies.'
- Something isn't right about my claim
- Tempting suggestion: I have lied to you and spoken *falsely*
- Semantic proposal: 'some' means 'not none but not all'
- But this seems implausible, as the following doesn't seem *inconsistent*  
'I've eaten some of the cookies: indeed, I've eaten all of them!'
- Better semantic proposal: 'some' just means 'not none'
- But then, if I didn't speak falsely, what was wrong with my claim?  
We have some explaining to do

## A clearly bad WAM

---

- Say that I tell you:  
'David Bowie died a bachelor.'
- Clearly this is false, since he was married when he died and  
'S is a bachelor' is true iff S is an unmarried male
- But say that I perversely wanted to defend an alternative semantics for 'bachelor' that makes the statement true:  
'S is a bachelor' is true iff S is a male
- I then try to explain away the apparent falsity by means of a WAM, appealing to the following conversational principle:  
**RULE OF BACHELORHOOD ASCRIPTIONS:** 'Only say someone is a bachelor when they aren't married!'

## A candidate good WAM (ctd)

---

- A conversational principle that we can reasonably expect people to abide by:  
**MAXIM OF QUANTITY:** 'Be as informative as is required by the purposes of the exchange!' (Grice 1975)
- By saying that I ate some of the cookies, I generate an *expectation* that I am not in a position to make the stronger claim that I ate all of the cookies
- My assertion **conversationally implies** that I didn't eat all the cookies, whilst falling short of entailing it
- So: we take my claim to be false, even though it is true, because it has an "**implicature**" that is false

## A clearly bad WAM (ctd)

---

- This is not convincing:  
The WAM does not proceed from general, independently supported principles; rather, it postulates some *ad hoc* rule specific to the case at hand
- DeRose calls such shallow manoeuvres '**bare WAM's**'

## References

---

- DeRose, K. 1995. Solving the Skeptical Problem. *The Philosophical Review* 104(1), pp. 1–52.
- DeRose, K. 1999: Contextualism: an explanation and defense. In J. Greco and E. Sosa, ed., *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, Blackwell Publishers.