

Skeptical Arguments From Possibility

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1. The Skeptical Argument

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My focus will be on skeptical arguments that proceed from the *epistemic* possibility of error.

1. The Skeptical Argument

What is epistemic possibility? For my purposes, epistemic possibility is the sense of possibility expressed by typical indicative uses of natural language “might”, “could”, “possible”, and so on, as in sentences like the following: “the keys might be in the car”.

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Importantly, I am **not** presupposing that epistemic possibility is possibility relative to what the speaker or anyone else knows. “epistemic possibility” is simply a label for a type of possibility we can identify through ostension.

1. The Skeptical Argument

The skeptical argument that will be my focus runs roughly as follows:

Knowledge is incompatible with the epistemic possibility of error. But error is almost always epistemically possible. So we know next to nothing.

See DeRose (1991), Lewis (1996), Albritton (2011), and Reed (2013).

1. The Skeptical Argument

More precisely, the skeptic's argument works like this:

Stage 1 (metalanguage):

P1. $(K\varphi \wedge \diamond\neg\varphi) \models \perp$, where $K\varphi$ abbreviates "I know that φ ", \diamond expresses epistemic possibility, and \models denotes the consequence relation for natural language sentences.

C. $\diamond\neg\varphi \models \neg K\varphi$

P1 is motivated by infelicity of asserting such conjunctions, which are known as *concessive knowledge attributions* or CKAs. See Rysiew (2001).

1. The Skeptical Argument

Stage 2 (object language):

$P1^*. \diamond \neg p$

$C^*. \neg Kp$

$P1^*$ is typically motivated by the additional premise that $\diamond q$, where q entails $\neg p$, plus the assumption that $\diamond \psi \rightarrow \diamond \neg \phi$, if ψ entails $\neg \phi$ (assuming ψ and ϕ are not themselves modalized). $\diamond q$ is taken either as a datum or motivated via the subjective indistinguishability of skeptical hypotheses.

1. The Skeptical Argument

Example:

P1. $(K\phi \wedge \Diamond\neg\phi) \models \perp$

C. $\Diamond\neg\phi \models \neg K\phi$

P1*. I might not have hands (since I might be a brain in a vat).

C*. It's not the case that I know I have hands.

2. The Standard Replies

The existing replies to the skeptical argument come in three main varieties:

1. Fallibilist Invariantism: accepts $P1^*$ but denies $P1$; knowledge is compatible with the epistemic possibility of error. See Rysiew (2001), Dougherty and Rysiew (2011), Reed (2013), Fantl and McGrath (2009), Worsnip (2015).

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Note: I don't myself think this is the right way to characterize fallibilism, but I will not press the point here. See Mizumoto (2011) for discussion of how to formulate fallibilism.

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The existing replies to the skeptical argument come in three main varieties:

2. Moorean Infallibilist Invariantism: accepts P1 but denies P1*; with respect to commonsense propositions, there is no epistemic possibility of error. See Moore (1959).

2. The Standard Replies

The existing replies to the skeptical argument come in three main varieties:

3. Contextualist Infallibilism: accepts P1 but holds that P1* is true only in contexts where C* does not conflict with our ordinary claims to knowledge. See DeRose (1991) and Lewis (1996).

3. The Nonclassical Strategy

P1. $(K\varphi \wedge \diamond\neg\varphi) \models \perp$

C. $\diamond\neg\varphi \models \neg K\varphi$

P1*. $\diamond\neg p$

C*. $\neg Kp$

The Nonclassical Strategy holds that the inference from P1 to C is *invalid*. This inference is valid if \models respects the entailment patterns of classical logic, hence the nonclassicality of the proposed strategy.

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On the Nonclassical Strategy, one can grant P1 and P1* without commitment to C*.

3. The Nonclassical Strategy

Desiderata:

A consequence relation \models such that:

(a) $(K\varphi \wedge \diamond\neg\varphi) \models \perp$

(b) $\diamond\neg\varphi \not\models \neg K\varphi$

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Given plausible assumptions about the semantics of K, Yalcin's (2007) *informational consequence*, \models_i , fulfills these desiderata. There are other consequence relations that also fulfill these desiderata. I focus on Yalcin's just to illustrate proof of concept.

3. The Nonclassical Strategy

On informational consequence, valid arguments preserve *acceptance*: every information state (i.e. set of worlds) that accepts the premises accepts the conclusion.

Simplifying a bit, on Yalcin's semantics, $\diamond\varphi$ expresses a property of information states: that of being compatible with φ . An information state s accepts $\diamond\varphi$ iff s has the aforementioned property: s is compatible with φ (i.e. s contains some world at which φ is true).

s accepts φ , where φ is a non-modal, descriptive sentence iff every world in s is a world where φ is true.

3. The Nonclassical Strategy

Assume $K\varphi$ and φ are non-modal, descriptive sentences and that $K\varphi$ is factive, i.e. $K\varphi$ is true at a world w only if φ is true at w .

Fact 1: $(K\varphi \wedge \diamond\neg\varphi) \models_1 \perp$

Proof: no coherent information state s accepts the above conjunction. By factivity, accepting the first conjunct requires every world in s to be a world where φ is true. But accepting the second conjunct requires s to contain a world where φ is false. (cf. Beddor (2020)).

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Fact 2: $\diamond\neg\varphi \not\equiv_1 \neg K\varphi$

Proof: suppose $s = \{w_1, w_2\}$, where $\neg\varphi$ and $\neg K\varphi$ are true at w_1 , but φ and $K\varphi$ are true at w_2 . s accepts $\diamond\neg\varphi$ since $\neg\varphi$ is true at w_1 . But s does not accept $\neg K\varphi$ since $K\varphi$ is true at w_2 .

3. The Nonclassical Strategy

Why the skeptic's argument is invalid:

The information contained in the claim that S knows that p is indeed incompatible with the epistemic possibility of error. So the skeptic is right that CKAs are contradictory.

However, the constraint on information states supplied by the epistemic possibility of error does *not* contain the information that S does not know that p. So the skeptic is wrong that the epistemic possibility of error entails that we lack knowledge.

3. The Nonclassical Strategy

The epistemic possibility of error only entails that it is *epistemically possible* that we lack knowledge. But epistemic possibility is not factive, so the epistemic possibility that we lack knowledge does not entail that we do in fact lack knowledge.

That is:

$\diamond\neg\varphi \models_1 \diamond\neg K\varphi.$

But $\diamond\neg K\varphi \not\models_1 \neg K\varphi.$

4. An Advantage of the Nonclassical Strategy

Benton (2018) notes that CKAs sound bad even when embedded:

(1) # Suppose I know it's raining, but it might not be raining.

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(1) # Suppose I know it's raining, but it might not be raining.

This embedding data is a prima facie problem for fallibilists, since they offer a pragmatic explanation of the infelicity of CKAs.

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But note that *third person* CKAs also sound bad embedded:

(2) # Suppose John knows it's raining, but it might not be raining.

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(2) # Suppose John knows it's raining, but it might not be raining.

This datum is a problem for infallibilists who accept a classical consequence relation. For they cannot hold that the embedded sentence expresses a contradiction, since “it might not be raining” clearly does not entail “John doesn't know it's raining.” But the Nonclassical Strategy faces no such problem.

4. An Advantage of the Nonclassical Strategy

Thank you!

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