

The generic skeptical argument, a version of Descartes's malicious demon hypothesis, goes as follows:

1. I don't know that I'm not a brain in a vat.
2. If I don't know that I'm not a brain in a vat, I don't know (any of a host of ordinary claims I confidently think I know including) that I have two hands..
3. So, I don't know that I have two hands.

Some strategies of response:

a. The skeptic supports 1 by asserting that if I were a brain in a vat, I could have exactly the experience I have been having all of my life, and I would not be able to tell that the beliefs induced by me vat experience are virtually all illusory.

The skeptic accepts 1 and 2 and concludes 3.

b. The confident anti-skeptic assumes (or argues for) the denial of 3, accepts 2, and concludes the denial of 1. The skeptical argument is run in the reverse direction.

c. Nozick accepts 1, denies 2 on the basis of his tracking account of knowledge, and denies 3.

d. David Lewis accepts 2 and allows that 1 is an uneliminated possibility. But in the right context, 1 may be properly ignorable, and in that context, the claim to know the denial of 3 may be correct. In another context, with higher standards in play, 1 is not properly ignorable and the claim to know the denial of 3 is incorrect.

Lewis suggests rules of ignorability that determine how contexts shift and higher or lower standards come to be in play.

Skeptical objection against Lewis: If there are good skeptical arguments that have been articulated, how can it ever be proper to ignore them? Maybe relaxed standards are never appropriate, so Lewis's elusive knowledge never shows up. In Lewis's terminology, this would be to claim that his Rule of Belief rules out ever properly ignoring skeptical possibilities such as brain in vat.

In discussing examples such as the deliberating jury, Lewis suggests that possibilities that are not being ignored may come to be ignored and properly so, so knowledge via proper ignoring of some possibilities may disappear and then reappear. After all, focus on extremely remote possibilities may impede the work of a jury. The skeptic may suggest that perhaps in these scenarios claims to know may be warranted to assert perhaps for pragmatic reasons even though it is strictly incorrect that anyone knows the claims. Warranted assertibility may substitute for knowledge in these contexts. Another possibility is that ordinary knowledge claims we make lack the status of knowledge or

warranted assertibility but we are nonetheless not epistemically blameworthy for making them.

Question: Can we defang skepticism by holding that while we lack certain knowledge, we know that some possibilities are far more probable than others and knowledge of probabilities is enough? Answer: Not if claims to know that probability judgments are correct are themselves vulnerable to skeptical doubt.

Question : Could one reasonably drop Lewis's rule of attention and otherwise accept his position? One might deny that barely asserting a possibility that conflicts with propositions one claims to know renders the possibility unignorable. Even if the defense lawyer asserts a far-fetched possibility that exonerates her client, if the possibility is too far-fetched, it may remain ignorable even if asserted in the conversation. Or does this suggestion run into its own difficulties?

What is knowledge worth, one might ask. Lewis, p. 215: "If you doubt the word "know" bears any real load in science or in metaphysics, I partly agree. The serious business of science has to do not with knowledge per se; but rather with the elimination of possibilities . . . and with the changes that one's belief system [should] undergo under the impact of such eliminations." Knowledge claims are useful in the conduct of life for limited cognitive beings like us.

Lewis: we can have justified true belief without knowledge, as in lottery cases. We can have knowledge without recognition (face recognition and chickensexing examples). We can maybe have knowledge without belief—Lewis suggests the example of an unselfconfident student who knows the answer but "has no confidence that he has it right, and so does not believe what he knows" (p. 210).

In responding to abstract arguments, it can be useful to focus on examples. What point or argument is the author making by means of this particular example? Does the example suggest a difficulty for another theorist's position? Does the example succeed in making the point author is using it to make, or is there an alternate better interpretation of the example than author gives, that allows us to reject the claim the author is urging?