

Simple Skeptical Arguments

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Constructing Arguments

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- When interpreting assigned articles and preparing for writing papers, I will often ask you to construct an argument in **premise-conclusion** form, like the ones on the following slides.
- Make your best attempt to make sure those arguments are **valid**.
 - An argument is valid if it is **impossible** for (i) the premises to be true AND (ii) the conclusion to be false.
 - We'll say more about "possibility" next week.
- To ensure that your argument is valid, try to
 - Break the argument into **steps** so that there are never more than three premises supporting a given conclusion.
 - The conclusion is justified by one of the deductive "rules" discussed by Harrell (e.g., modus ponens).

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Skepticism

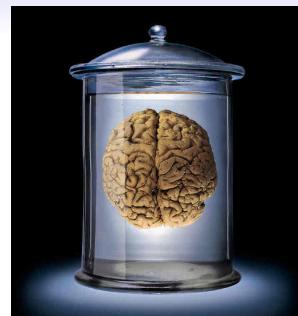
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Skepticism

- For any subject X, philosophers use the phrase “X skepticism” to denote the thesis that we cannot know facts about X.
- Example:** “Moral skepticism” is the view that moral facts are unknowable.
- Typically, philosophers who discuss X-skepticism assume there are facts about X (e.g., that there are moral facts).

Simple Skeptical Argument



- Premise 1:** I don't know that I am not a BIV.
- Premise 2:** If I don't know that I am not a BIV, then I don't know I have hands.
- Conclusion:** I don't know I have hands.
 - Again, you can replace “I have hands” with virtually any number of other mundane things that you believe you know.

Radical, External World Skepticism



I will typically talk about brains in vats (BIVs), but you can pick your favorite story that might be used to doubt all of your experiences, such as

- You're the victim of an evil demon,
- You're in the Matrix.
- You're part of a massive computer simulation.

There are many analogs of the simple skeptical argument ...

Hume's Skeptical Argument



- **Premise 1:** I don't know that the laws of physics won't change tonight.
- **Premise 2:** If I don't know that the laws of physics won't change tonight, then I don't know the sun will rise tomorrow.
- **Conclusion:** I don't know the sun will rise tomorrow.
 - Again, you can replace "the sun will rise tomorrow" with virtually any number of other mundane things about parts of space and time that have yet to be observed.

Options

Philosophers have taken all three options.

- "Neo-Mooreans" reject P1 but often endorse P2.
- Philosophers who reject "epistemic closure" reject P2. They typically endorse P1.
- Contextualists deny that the argument is valid because it equivocates on the meaning of the word "knows." However, they maintain both premises are true, when the word "know" is interpreted differently in the two premises.

Responding to the Simple Skeptical Argument

No matter the version of the simple skeptical argument, you have three options.

- Reject P1.
- Reject P2.
- Maintain the argument is **invalid** (i.e., that the conclusion does not follow from the premises).

Up Next:

- For two weeks, we will study various theories of knowledge.
- In weeks four through ten, we will show that different theories of knowledge allow us to respond to skeptical arguments in different ways.