

A Solution to Skeptical Puzzles

Kok Yong Lee

Dr. Matthew McGrath, Dissertation Supervisor

Abstract

In this dissertation, I aim at resolving an epistemic puzzle that I call ‘the skeptical puzzle’. An instance of this puzzle is as follows:

- (1) I know that I have hands.
- (2) I don’t know that I am not a brain in a vat (being stimulated to experience having hands).
- (3) If I know that I have hands, I know that I am not a brain in a vat.

(1)-(3) are puzzling since, while each is individually plausible, they are jointly inconsistent.

In this dissertation, I argue that the truth values of (1)-(3) vary with contexts. More precisely, (1), not-(2), and (3) are true in the *ordinary* context, while not-(1), (2), and (3) are true in the *skeptical* context. This explains why we initially find (1)-(3) plausible: (1)-(3) are initially plausible since they are indeed true (in some contexts). Moreover, (1)-(3) do not constitute a genuine paradox since, in no context, (1)-(3) are true altogether.

My approach to the skeptical puzzle is in line with the contextualist solution to the puzzle, but differs in important aspects. Contextualists claim that the variability of the truth values of (1)-(3) across the ordinary and skeptical contexts consists in the variability of the *standards for knowledge*, which specify how strong one’s *epistemic position* with

respect to p must be in order for one to know p , while I argue that the very variability of truth values consists in the variability of S 's epistemic position with respect to p across such contexts. That is, my view, but not contextualism, implies that S 's epistemic position is context-sensitive in some sense.

I argue that the contextualist solution (and any account that also appeals to the variability of the standards for knowledge) fails to offer a satisfactory answer to the skeptical puzzle. In Chapter Two, I discuss the main reason (or one of the main reasons) for the thesis of the variability of the standards for knowledge, and find it untenable. This shows that the thesis is unmotivated. In Chapter Three, I further argue that the contextualist solution is theoretically uninteresting since it deals only with a kind of skeptical arguments that is theoretically insignificant. This shows that we should not resolve the skeptical puzzle in terms of the variability of the standards for knowledge. Instead, we should adopt the thesis of the variability of S 's epistemic position.

I propose that one's epistemic position with respect to p should be characterized by the *sensitivity* of one's reason, where S 's reason for p is sensitive just in case S would not have the same reason if p had not been the case. Sensitivity captures our intuitive idea that knowing that p requires one's reason to track the truth of p , and it also explains the persuasiveness of (2): Typically, a person tends to think that she does not know that she is not a brain in a vat, when she realizes that if she were a brain in a vat, she would still have all her current experiences, memories, etc., that suggest that she is not a brain in a vat.

I formulate sensitivity in terms of counterfactual conditionals. How should the truth conditions of such conditionals be understood? The common practice is to appeal to

the possible-worlds semantics of counterfactual conditionals. However, the possible-worlds semantics has suffered from some serious problems. In Chapter Six, I suggest that epistemologists are better off to adopt the causal modeling semantics for counterfactual conditionals. I point out that causal-modeling semantics is particularly helpful in distinguishing two distinct types of counterfactualization—the *interventional* and *inferential counterfactualization*—which are crucial to the characterization of the sensitivity account.

In Chapter Seven, I argue that the assessment of the sensitivity of one's reason for p is relative to the *epistemic inquiry* the assessor is engaging in. There are two basic kinds of epistemic inquiry, defining by two distinct epistemic goals: the *liberal goal* (i.e., to accept a hypothesis unless one has (sufficiently good) reasons against it) and the *conservative goal* (i.e., to accept a hypothesis only if one has (sufficiently good) reasons for it). I argue that (1) and not-(2) are true relative to the liberal inquiry, while not-(1) and (2) are true relative to the conservative inquiry. This explains why (1) and not-(2) are true in the ordinary context, while not-(1) and (2), the skeptical one.