

## Agrippa's Trilemma

The sceptical thesis:

No person, no matter how well justified she is in believing some proposition, can ever be justified well enough for her belief to count as a piece of knowledge.

### I. The concept of knowledge

If Sally knows that laughter is the best medicine, then

- 1) laughter is the best medicine
- 2) Sally believes with confidence that laughter is the best medicine
- 3) Sally is well justified in believing that laughter is the best medicine

Each condition is a necessary condition for Sally's knowing that laughter is the best medicine.

That is, if any one condition does not obtain, Sally does not know that laughter is the best medicine, even should each of the other two conditions obtain.

### II. Agrippa's trilemma

Consider any proposition. How might it be that Sally is epistemically justified in believing that proposition? Sally is epistemically justified in believing it if she has adequate reasons for thinking it true. Those reasons, of course, will be other beliefs Sally has.

This chain of thought leads to the contention that the argument by which one is epistemically justified in believing some proposition will:

- 1) terminate in beliefs unsupported by justificatory argument
- or
- 2) eventually circle back to include the belief in question as a presupposition
- or
- 3) regress to infinity.

This contention is known as Agrippa's trilemma, named for the Hellenistic philosopher to whom its first explicit formulation is due.

### III. The argument from Agrippa's trilemma to the sceptical thesis

In none of these three cases, or so the sceptic says, can the target belief count as knowledge.

In case 1), the target belief is supported by a belief itself unsupported by argument. Even if the argument from that belief to the target belief is strong, one is no better justified in believing the

target belief than one is in believing the unsupported belief, and one is not justified in believing a proposition one has no reason to believe.

In case 2), the target belief is supported by circular reasoning, and circular reasoning is not justificatory reasoning.

In case 3), the target belief is supported by a belief that is supported by a belief that is supported by a belief... and on to infinity. Since the chain of argument never ends, one is without justification in believing any proposition contained within it.

In none of the three cases can one be well enough justified in believing the target proposition for one's belief to count as a piece of knowledge.

Since for any target proposition, these are the only three options how a line of justificatory argument can go, one can never be justified well enough in believing a proposition for that belief to count as knowledge.

#### IV. Objections

1) The sceptical thesis refutes itself. Any reason one could have for believing it cannot, because of Agrippa's trilemma, count as a reason strong enough to warrant believing it.

2) Epistemic justification is comparative as well as linear. One is well enough justified in believing that p for the belief that p to count as a piece of knowledge however one's justificatory argument goes so long as one believes no proposition from which one could argue that not-p.

3) Sometimes we are very well justified in believing a proposition for which we can have no argument. We are very well justified in holding those beliefs we acquire directly in sensory experience, for instance. These are beliefs whose truth is directly evident to us or beliefs that are so close to the states of affairs they represent that there is no possibility of their being false. They form the base to which all empirical justification is anchored.

4) The inferentialist model of justification that gives rise to Agrippa's trilemma is entirely wrong headed. We are well justified in believing a proposition just so long as the belief-forming mechanism by which we acquired that belief reliably generates true beliefs in the conditions in which we acquired that belief. (We're well justified epistemically in believing that p so long as we wouldn't have come to believe that p except that "p" is true.) Epistemic justification has nothing to do with lines of argument.