

## **No one knows anything**

The sceptical thesis regarding knowledge of the external world:

No one knows anything about any object or event external to his or her own mind (not even that anything external to his or her own mind exists).

The external world?

The world of objects and events distinct from objects and events within one's mind. The physical world apart from one's mental world. The world we think we know (or begin to know) through our senses.

The sceptical thesis is neutral about whether we can know the contents of our own minds, whether we can know the meanings of our words, and whether we can know anything about mathematical or other ideal objects or relations.

An argument for the sceptical thesis:

1. If you know of some proposition supposedly about an object or event apart from one's mind that it is true, then it is perfectly all right for you to be absolutely certain that that proposition is true.
2. It is never all right for you to be absolutely certain of any proposition about an object or event apart from one's mind that it is true.

Therefore: 3. You do not know of any proposition about the external world that it is true.

4. You were picked at random as an example of an epistemic agent for use in this argument. Any other epistemic agent (if any other exists) would have worked just as well.

Therefore: 5. No one knows of any proposition supposedly about something in the external world whether that proposition is true.

An argument for the first premise of the sceptical argument:

6. The proposition "He knew that it was raining, but it wasn't certain (to him) that it was raining" is internally inconsistent.
7. This internal inconsistency is best explained by the idea that the concept of knowing that a proposition is true contains the concept of its being certain (to one) that that proposition is true.

Therefore: 8. If you know of some proposition that it is true, it is certain (to you) that that proposition is true.

9. If some proposition is certainly true (to you), then it is perfectly all right for you to be certain that it is true.

Therefore: 1. If you know of some proposition that it is true, then it is perfectly all right for you to be certain that that proposition is true.

An argument for the second premise of the sceptical argument:

10. To be certain of a proposition about the external world that it is true is to take toward it the attitude that nothing that happens could count as any evidence against it or supply any reason for doubting that it is true.

11. To take the attitude that nothing that could happen or turn up could be evidence against one's belief or that nothing that could occur to one could be a reason for doubting that one's belief is true is to hold that belief dogmatically.

12. To hold a belief dogmatically is both to set yourself up for embarrassing or belittling experiences and lessons and to have an inflated sense of the firmness of your epistemic grip on the world.

13. It is never all right to set yourself up for embarrassment or to have an inflated sense of your epistemic grip on the world.

Therefore: 2. It is never all right for you to be certain of any proposition supposedly about things in the external world that it is true.

A comment on "all right" as used in this argument:

In what sense of "all right" is it all right or not all right to be certain of something?

Is it "all right" in the ethical, prudential, aesthetic, or epistemic sense? (Or in some other sense?)

Clearly in the prudential sense. What's at stake is whether having the attitude of certainty puts at risk one's physical or emotional well being.

### Objections to the arguments

1. One can know something without being certain that it is true. "He knew that it was raining, but he wasn't certain that it was" is perfectly fine.

2. It is perfectly all right to be certain of anything one knows to be true. Since what one knows to be true is true, one can never be embarrassed by discovering that it is false. For that reason, taking a dogmatic attitude toward it can never cause one grief.

At most, the argument warns us to be cautious when we claim to know something. We are prudent to claim to know only that which we in fact do know. (To ensure that we don't claim to know what we don't know, we should hold ourselves to very high standards of epistemic justification.)

3. The argument is circular. Statement 12 is that to hold a belief dogmatically is both to set yourself up for embarrassing or belittling experiences and lessons and to have an inflated sense of the firmness of your epistemic grip on the world. Should we ask why we should accept this statement, we would be told that holding a belief dogmatically is imprudent in these ways because we can't know of the belief we hold dogmatically that it is true. (Should we be exposed as wrong, we would be penalized.) But whether we cannot know of a belief that it is true is just what is at issue.