

Agrippa's trilemma

The Cranky Professor

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Most of us are pleased to think we know a thing or two. A few of us, though, are not so sure, and we have what seem to be some pretty good arguments on our side.

We're called "sceptics"—or, better, "philosophical sceptics," since it's not just knowledge of astrology or alien abduction we deny. Philosophical sceptics hold that no one knows anything at all about anything. No one knows, for instance, that penguins eat fish, or that oak trees lose their leaves in the late fall, or that bus strikes make life even more difficult for students than it usually is.

The best argument for scepticism about knowledge begins with an observation called Agrippa's trilemma, named in honour of an ancient philosophical sceptic.

Let's first, though, talk about the concept of knowledge. If Sally knows that penguins eat fish, then not only is Sally's belief that penguins eat fish true, but Sally has good reason for thinking that it is true. This good reason she has would seem to be an argument. Sally can express her reason by arguing that, say, since she has seen penguins eating fish, penguins eat fish. She might add that since the *Great Book of Flightless Seabirds* she has been studying all term lists fish as one of the things penguins eat, again, penguins eat fish.

Now notice that Sally's reasons in favour of the statement that penguins eat fish support the view that Sally knows that penguins eat fish only if Sally knows that those reasons themselves are true. After all, if Sally's reason that penguins eat fish is that the penguins themselves told her so, then Sally doesn't know that penguins eat fish, even if they do, for her support for her belief is a false belief.

This means, then, that if Sally knows that penguins eat fish, Sally has an argument that penguins eat fish and Sally knows of the premises in that argument that they, too, are true. But then, of course, if Sally knows of those premises that they are true, Sally must have premises that support them and she must know that they are true as well.

I think you're now seeing what Agrippa saw.

Agrippa's observation is this: Any line of argument from a target belief, a belief someone claims to know is true, will do one (and only one) of three things: 1) it will regress from argument to argument to infinity; 2) it will circle back on itself, such that a conclusion in it will appear earlier as a premise; or 3) it will simply come to a halt.

But if a line of argument regresses forever, nowhere does warrant enter. As well, if a line of argument circles back on itself, it is a piece of circular reasoning, and we cannot know something on the basis of circular reasoning. Finally, if a line of argument simply halts, its end point must be arbitrary from the point of view of warrant. (Insisting “Dammit, I just know that this is true” doesn’t make halting there any less arbitrary.)

In short, to know that penguins eat fish, one must have an argument that penguins eat fish, and one must know that the premises of that argument are true. To know that the premises of that argument are true, one must have an argument for each of them that it is true. And so on and on (option one), or around in a circle (option two), or I give up (option three).

Thus, no one knows anything about anything. For knowledge requires justification or warrant, and we can never have justification or warrant.

Some philosophers are not convinced by this argument. They think it makes a mistake right at the beginning. The argument presupposes that the justification or warrant we could have for believing something will always be other beliefs. Sally’s belief that penguins eat fish is supported by her belief that she’s seen penguins eating fish, and that belief is supported by her belief that her eyes and the lighting were good when she saw what she believed to be penguins eating what she believed to be fish. This presupposition is false, these philosophers say: sometimes our warrant for believing a statement comes from something other than a belief.

One view here is that what supports our belief and renders us justified in holding it is that we acquired it through a sensory-psychological mechanism that tends to produce true beliefs. It’s the reliability of the mechanism by which we acquired the belief that warrants our holding it, and the reliability of the mechanism isn’t a belief—it’s a state of our physiological machine.

On this view, we don’t have to have reasons for a belief to be a piece of knowledge.

Another view is that not always when a line of argument simply halts does it halt at an arbitrary point. Sometimes it halts at the initial justified belief, a belief justified (not by another belief) but by the fact the belief reports. Sally’s belief that she seems to see a penguin is warranted simply by the fact that she seems to see a penguin. That belief, because it is warranted (though not by an inference from other beliefs), can confer warrant on beliefs inferred from it.

I leave it as an assignment in philosophy to criticise or defend these two responses.

Let me end with an observation of my own. Scepticism about knowledge is much more popular in the academy than many of us think. But while the ancient sceptics were explicit and bold about their scepticism, scepticism in the contemporary world is subterranean, often unconscious of itself.

I have in mind phrases like “tentative knowledge” or “provisional knowledge.” Now knowledge, if we understand the concept correctly, cannot be tentative or provisional. The ancient sceptics, for their part, thought that all our understandings were ungrounded and could never be otherwise. Thus, they concluded, no one knows anything. Contemporary academics, on the other hand, proclaim, “Of course people know things! (Not really, though).”