

Chapter 8

Agrippa's Trilemma

The thesis we are considering is this: No one knows anything about the world external to his or her own mind (not even that there is such a world). We can call this thesis the thesis of scepticism about knowledge of the external world. Before attempting to determine whether the thesis of scepticism about knowledge of the external world is true or false, let us try to understand better both it and the argument we have given for it.

1. Epistemic justification

If you know that presently you are reading a page in a philosophy text, then you can know that you are not being deceived by an evil scientist into falsely believing that presently you are reading a page in a philosophy text. That is because *knowing* that presently you are reading a page in a philosophy text implies that presently you *are* reading a page in a philosophy text, and *that*, in turn, implies that you are not being deceived into falsely believing that presently you are reading a page in a philosophy text. But you cannot know that you are not being deceived by an evil scientist into falsely believing that presently you are reading a page in a philosophy text. Therefore, you do not know that presently you are reading a page in a philosophy text. For all you know, you are reading your economics text, having mistaken it for your philosophy text. Or, for all you know, you are merely imagining or dreaming you are reading.

The argument just given does not rest on the contention that you are, in fact, reading your economics text under the misapprehension that it's your philosophy text, or that you are merely imagining or dreaming that you are reading a text. It does not rest on the contention that it is in any way likely that you are wrong about the text in front of you or merely imagining or dreaming that you are reading. It might not even require that it be possible that you are wrong about what you are reading or that you are merely imagining or dreaming something or that there could be an evil scientist able to deceive you about anything he wants to deceive you about. Our sceptic, who thinks no one knows anything about the world external to his or her own mind because he endorses as sound the argument above, is not trying to convince you that you are mistaken about anything (except, of course, about whether you or other people can know things). Nor is she trying to convince you that you are dreaming. That is not how the argument for scepticism we are considering works.

The argument for scepticism we are considering does not work by proposing that you have false beliefs about what is in front of you or even that it is likely or possible that you have false beliefs about what is in front of you. It is not an argument that challenges the truth of what you believe. Maybe what you believe is true. Maybe presently you are indeed, as you believe, reading a page in a philosophy text. What the argument for scepticism we are considering challenges is the strength or quality of your *justification* for believing what you believe. According to that argument, you are not well enough justified in believing that presently you are reading a page in a philosophy text for your belief to count as a piece of

knowledge. Because you lack adequate justification for knowledge, you do not know. Because you lack adequate justification for knowledge, you do not know, *even if what you believe is true*.

Recall from Part I of this text the three conditions necessary for knowledge. If you know that presently you are reading a page of a philosophy text, then 1) presently you are reading a page of a philosophy text, 2) you believe that presently you are reading a page of a philosophy text, and 3) you are very well justified epistemically in believing that presently you are reading a page of a philosophy text. To say that each condition is a necessary condition for knowledge is to say that if any one condition is not fulfilled, then you do not know that presently you are reading a page of a philosophy text. The sceptic who endorses as sound the argument given in the first paragraph of this section holds that you are not well enough justified epistemically for your belief that presently you are reading a page of a philosophy text to be a piece of knowledge. You don't know, even though you believe with confidence and even if your belief is true, because the epistemic grounds on which you believe are not strong enough to make your belief a piece of knowledge.

You believe that presently you are reading a page in a philosophy text. Why are you not adequately justified epistemically for that belief to count as knowledge? It would seem that you have plenty of good evidence in favour of your belief. Why is all the good evidence you have not evidence enough for knowledge? Even more, why must you always remain inadequately justified for your belief to count as knowledge? Why will your collecting more and more evidence in favour of your belief never turn your belief into a piece of knowledge?

Recall again from Part I the standard account of the nature of epistemic justification. If a person is well justified epistemically in believing that penguins eat fish, then that person is aware of a good argument to the conclusion that penguins eat fish. Each of the premises of that good argument must express something that that person believes. A good argument is an argument that moves from acceptable premises to its conclusion through strong or valid inferences.

Keeping the standard account of epistemic justification in mind, suppose that Sally believes that penguins eat fish and that she is aware of an argument to the conclusion that penguins eat fish, an argument each of whose premises she believes true. Suppose that each inference in that argument is strong or valid (and that Sally is aware of this). Now suppose that for one of the premises in her argument, a premise, we said, that Sally believes to be true, Sally is unaware of a good argument that has that premise as its conclusion. That means, on the standard account of epistemic justification, that Sally is not justified epistemically in believing that premise. Sally, then, is aware of an argument that proceeds from premises she accepts to the conclusion that penguins eat fish through strong or valid inferences—an argument, though, one of whose premises she is not epistemically justified in believing. Is Sally epistemically justified in believing that penguins eat fish?

Sally, we can admit, is fairly well justified epistemically in believing that penguins eat fish. She has no evidence against her view and some evidence in favour of it. But she is not entirely well justified epistemically in believing that penguins eat fish. After all, Sally has no reason for thinking that one of the pieces of what she takes to be evidence that penguins eat fish really is evidence that penguins eat fish. Remember that Sally has no argument in favour of one of her beliefs about what she takes to be evidence.

So, then, in answer to the question is Sally epistemically justified in believing that penguins eat fish, we can say yes, she is justified, but we must quickly add that she is not well justified. Sally might be fairly well justified epistemically in believing that penguins eat fish, even though part of the reason that supports her belief is itself not well supported. But that part of the reason for which she believes that penguins eat fish is itself not well supported certainly means that Sally is not well enough justified epistemically for her belief to count as knowledge. Sally believes with some justification that penguins eat fish, but Sally does not know that penguins eat fish. Sally does not know that penguins eat fish despite, believing confidently, believing on evidence, and believing truly.

It would seem, from this example, that a premise in a justificatory argument does not transmit much more justification to the conclusion of that argument than it itself possesses. A premise gives one little more reason to believe what follows from it than one has to believe that premise itself. The lesson is that one must be well justified in believing each of the premises in one's justificatory argument if that argument is to show one well justified in believing its conclusion.

Now consider your belief that presently you are reading a page in a philosophy text. If you are well justified in believing that presently you are reading a page in a philosophy text, you are aware of a good argument having your belief as its conclusion. What is this good argument in which your justification consists?

"It presently looks to me as though I am reading a page in a philosophy text. My eyes are fine and the lighting in this room is fine. How things look to fine eyes in fine conditions is a good guide to how they are. Therefore, I am presently reading a page in a philosophy text." That argument certainly confers some degree of justification on your believing that presently you are reading a page in a philosophy text. But how high a degree of justification does it confer? That depends on how well one is justified in believing each of the premises of your justificatory argument. To the extent that you lack a good argument in favour of any of those premises, you lack justification for believing that presently you are reading a page of a philosophy text. You are not well justified in believing that presently you are reading a page of a philosophy unless you are well justified in holding true the premises of your justificatory argument.

2. Agrippa's trilemma

We come now to the core thought behind the sceptical challenge involving the justification condition on knowledge. The sceptic says that whatever reason you possess for thinking that presently you are reading a page in a philosophy text, you do not possess reason enough for your belief to count as knowledge. Not only do you not now possess reason adequate for your belief to count as knowledge, adds the sceptic, but you will never collect reason adequate for your belief to count as knowledge, no matter how long or hard you work at collecting evidence and answering doubt. Thus, you do not now know that presently you are reading a page in a philosophy text and you will never come to know that presently you are reading a page in a philosophy text.

You cannot come to know that presently you are reading a page in a philosophy text for you can never be aware of an adequately strong justificatory argument that presently you are reading a page in a philosophy text. That is because any line of argument that you are

justified in believing that presently you are reading a page in a philosophy text will do one of three (and only one of three) things, each of which prevents that line from conferring justification sufficient for your belief to count as knowledge. Any line of justificatory argument will regress from belief to belief endlessly or terminate in an undefended and, thereby, arbitrary assumption or circle back such that some belief in it supports that very same belief. This contention, that a justificatory argument will regress to infinity or halt arbitrarily or contain circular reasoning, is called Agrippa's trilemma. (Nothing is known today about the Hellenistic philosopher Agrippa except that he proposed five modes of casting doubt on a person's claim to know something, three of which form the trilemma we have just described.)

Here, again, is Agrippa's trilemma:

For any person S and any proposition "p" that S believes, any line of argument purporting to show that S is justified in believing that p will:

a) regress from belief to belief to belief without ever stopping. The argument that p will contain the premise that q; the argument that q will contain the premise that r; the argument that r will contain the premise that s; the argument that s will contain the premise that t..., and so on to infinity.

or

b) terminate in an undefended assumption. The argument that p will contain the premise that q and no line of argument will support the proposition "q." S's belief that q will not itself be supported by argument.

or

c) form a circle in which a conclusion of an argument close to p in the chain appears as a premise further along in the chain. The argument that p will contain the premise that q; the argument that q will contain the premise that r; the argument that r will contain the premise that s; the argument that s will contain the premise that q—but the statement that q has already appeared in the chain of argument; and so the chain will loop around in a circle.

We can make the trilemma clearer by returning to your belief that presently you are reading a page in a philosophy text. A premise in your argument that presently you are reading a page in a philosophy text is that your eyes are fine. You have an argument that your eyes are fine. A premise in that argument is that your doctor said they were fine. You have an argument that indeed the doctor did say they were fine. A premise in that argument is that you heard your doctor say they are fine. You have an argument that you heard your doctor say your eyes are fine. A premise in your argument is that your ears are fine. You have an argument that your ears are fine. A premise in that argument is that... And, so, a line of argument that ends with the proposition that you are reading a page in a philosophy text has no beginning. That is the first of the three possibilities in Agrippa's trilemma.

Or, alternatively: A premise in your argument that presently you are reading a page in a philosophy text is that it looks to you as though presently you are reading a page in a philosophy text. You have no argument that it looks to you as though presently you are reading a page in a philosophy text. It just looks to you as though presently you are reading a

page in a philosophy text. End of story. There's nothing in your mind that supports this belief. That is the second of the three possibilities in Agrippa's trilemma.

Or, alternatively: A premise in your argument that presently you are reading a page in a philosophy text is that how things look to fine eyes in fine conditions is a good guide to how those things are. You have an argument that how things look to fine eyes in fine conditions is a good guide to how those things are. A premise in this argument is that often in the past how things looked to your fine eyes in good conditions turned out to be how those things were. A premise in your argument that often in the past how things looked to fine eyes in fine conditions is that the dish looked white to your fine eyes when you viewed it in fine conditions and it was white. A premise in your argument that the dish was white is that how things look to fine eyes in fine conditions is a good guide to how those things are. A premise in your argument that how things look to fine eyes in fine conditions is a good guide to how those things are is that often in the past how things looked to your fine eyes in fine conditions... and so on. Your line of argument has formed a circle, with propositions functioning to lend support to themselves.

Agrippa's trilemma states that any line of justificatory argument will follow one (and only one) of the three patterns described above. There is no fourth pattern a line of justificatory argument can take. A line of argument can do no other than regress to infinity, end at an undefended belief, or circle around on itself.

3. The implications of Agrippa's trilemma

The sceptic who says that no one is ever well enough justified in believing something for her belief to be a piece of knowledge makes these two claims. First, that if a person is justified in believing something, then that person is aware of an argument that has that something as its conclusion. Second, that any line of justificatory argument will follow one of the three patterns described in Agrippa's trilemma.

Your task, now, is to explain how these two claims support the contention that no one is ever well enough justified in believing something for their belief to count as knowledge. The question for you to answer is: How does one get from the standard account of epistemic justification plus Agrippa's trilemma to the conclusion that no one knows anything about anything external to her or his own mind?

Take ten minutes or so to compose in writing your answer to the question in the previous paragraph. (Hint: Take the patterns one at a time, and explain how a chain of argument in each pattern will fail to confer strong justification on its target belief.)

Do you think that the sceptic is right? Do you think the argument from Agrippa's trilemma that you have constructed succeeds in showing that no one knows anything about the external world?

Now that you have completed your task, read on and compare your answer to the answer given below.

The question is how Agrippa's trilemma supports the sceptical contention that no one knows anything about objects or events beyond their own minds. We will take the three possibilities in the trilemma one at a time. We want to show that no matter which of the three patterns attends a target belief, that target belief will fail to count as knowledge because it is

inadequately justified on that pattern. Since there is no fourth pattern, a target belief will be attended by a line of argument in one of the three patterns. Since, then, a target belief will not count as knowledge no matter which of the three patterns attends it and there is no fourth pattern, no target belief whatever can count as knowledge.

Let us begin with the first pattern, in which a chain of justificatory argument regresses to infinity. Suppose that the chain of justificatory argument for a target belief regresses to infinity. Why does the person holding that target belief lack knowledge that it is true? Well, to know something, one must be aware of a good argument that has that something as a conclusion. Suppose that our person is indeed aware of an argument in favour of the target belief. That argument confers strong justification upon the target belief only if the person knows of each of its premises that it is true. To know of a premise in his argument that it is true, that person has to be aware of a good argument that has the statement expressed in that premise as its conclusion. But if a chain of justificatory argument regresses to infinity, a person can never know of any belief in the chain that that belief is true, for that belief is supported by an argument the premises of which are not known to be true. And so the person cannot have adequate ground to know that the target belief is true. Thus, if the chain of justificatory argument in favour of the target belief regresses to infinity, then the person's belief that the target belief is true cannot amount to knowledge that it is true.

If a chain of argument regresses to infinity, then one can never know that the belief at the end of that chain is true, for one can never know of any belief in that chain that that belief rests on true beliefs. It would appear, then, that if a person is to know something, the argument in favour of the target belief had better come to a stop somewhere. That the line of justificatory argument for a target belief comes to a stop is the second possibility in Agrippa's trilemma. It seems, though, that the line stopping no more provides strong justification for a target belief than does the line regressing infinitely.

Suppose a target belief is supported by an argument, and the premises of that argument are themselves supported by arguments. Now suppose that one of the premises in the argument supporting a premise in the argument supporting the target belief does not itself have an argument in back of it. We now have a starting point, one that stops the chain of argument from regressing. That premise confers justification on the target belief only if it itself is a statement the person has good reason for believing true. But that there is no argument in back of it means that the person entirely lacks reason for believing it true. It is, after all, an undefended premise. That it is undefended means that, from the point of view of reason, the person believes it arbitrarily. The target belief will inherit this element of arbitrariness. To the extent that the target belief is tainted with the arbitrariness of an undefended belief, the person will lack justification for holding it. Thus, a person cannot know to be true any belief supported by a chain of argument that ends in an undefended premise. Therefore, if the chain of justificatory argument that a person has for a target belief just comes to an end somewhere, that person lacks strong justification for holding that target belief and, so, that belief does not count as a piece of knowledge.

The third possibility in Agrippa's trilemma is that a line of justificatory argument circles back on itself. Instead of regressing to infinity in argument after argument or terminating in an undefended premise, the line of justificatory argument goes round and round and round. When this happens, the person holding the target belief is engaged in circular

reasoning. In circular reasoning, some line of justificatory argument simply presupposes as true a statement that it must show to be true. For instance, suppose I believe that men have been to the moon, and that I believe this on the grounds that rocks I saw in the space museum are from the moon. I believe that the rocks are from the moon on the grounds that people who have been to the moon brought them back. But that belief implies that men have been to the moon. On what grounds do I believe that men have been to the moon? On the grounds that the rocks I saw in the space museum are from the moon. Now my line of argument is going in a circle. I'm actually presupposing that men have gone to the moon; I have no argument independent of this claim to support that claim. An argument that goes around in a circle is not a justificatory argument for that argument simply presupposes that the claims within the circle are true. Thus, if a line of justificatory argument for a target belief turns back on itself to form a circle, that target belief cannot stand as a piece of knowledge.

A line of argument in favour of a belief can only either regress to infinity, end in an undefended belief, or form a circle. But a line of argument in favour of a belief that takes any one of any of these three patterns will not confer strong justification on that belief. Thus, since one must be strongly justified in believing something for that belief to count as knowledge, no one knows anything.

4. Agrippa's trilemma and the evil scientist argument

The evil scientist argument for scepticism about knowledge of the external world is this: 1) If you know that presently you are reading a philosophy text, then you can know that you are not being deceived by an evil scientist into falsely believing that presently you are reading a philosophy text. 2) You cannot know that you are not being deceived by an evil scientist into falsely believing that presently you are reading a philosophy text. Therefore, 3) you do not know that presently you are reading a philosophy text. Since 4) both you and the proposition that presently you are reading a philosophy text were picked at random for this argument (any other person and any other proposition supposedly about the external world would have worked just as well), we must conclude that 5) no one knows anything about the world external to her or his mind.

Strictly speaking, the evil scientist argument isn't really needed to establish scepticism about knowledge of the external world. Agrippa's trilemma seems all by itself to imply that no one knows anything about the external world. Yet the evil scientist argument is rhetorically very powerful; it brings the sceptical thesis home to a person as no other argument can. Agrippa's trilemma, though, can play an important role in the evil scientist argument. One can appeal to Agrippa's trilemma in defending the second premise of the evil scientist argument. Putting the two arguments together can make a person feel vividly that he knows nothing at all about the world around him.

The implications for the possibility of knowledge of Agrippa's trilemma are what make the second premise of the evil scientist argument so difficult to deny. According to that premise, you cannot know that you are not being deceived by an evil scientist into falsely believing that presently you are reading a philosophy text. "Yes I can know that I am not being deceived by an evil scientist!" one wants to say. But each line of justificatory argument in favour of what one wants to say will regress to infinity, halt arbitrarily, or turn in a circle. Any line of justificatory argument that regresses to infinity, halts arbitrarily, or turns in a circle

fails to confer on the target belief justification sufficient for that belief to count as knowledge. So, you cannot know that you are not being deceived by an evil scientist. For all you know and all that you can know, nothing is really the way you believe it is.