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How Do We Know that We're Not Brains in Vats?

Toward a Picture of Knowledge

7.1. Two Types of Explanation-Based Answers to Skepticism and the Problem with Giving Only the Positive Explanation

One way to present an anti-skeptical position is to advance an account of what knowledge is on which we do know what the skeptic denies we know. This could perhaps be a full-blown theory of knowledge—though, hopefully, a good enough picture would do.¹ One could then also put forward an account of what the relevant facts of our situation are, such that, given the facts posited, we satisfy the proposed requirements for knowledge, and so come out knowing at least much of what we take ourselves to know. (But as the account of our place in the world likely won't have to go beyond the claim that our factual situation is pretty much what we commonly take it to be, it can often just be left unsaid.) One could then apply such an account to the skeptic's argument, and the account may tell us where, and not just that, the argument goes wrong.

When applied to AI, which is so thoroughly driven by thoughts about knowledge (or the lack thereof), we will check our account's ruling on whether we know that skeptical hypotheses are false, in addition to its ruling that we do know the various Os we take ourselves to know, and we should be able to locate where, on our account, that argument goes wrong. On some accounts: "Oh, that argument misfires at its second premise—that's the one that's wrong on my view." We can call this the "positive explanatory approach" to skepticism (or the approach on which one provides a "positive explanation"). It is at least roughly the way that Nozick engages skepticism, utilizing what should be counted as a theory, as opposed to just a picture,

¹ The idea then would be that since the picture gives conditions for knowledge that are *approximately* correct, our satisfying the conditions it posits gives us good, even if not conclusive, reasons for concluding that we do know what the skeptic denies we know.

"Positive explanatory"
responses to skepticism:
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of knowledge. What he hopes to achieve in this way is an explanation, in light of the skeptic's argument, of how knowledge is possible (Nozick 1981: 8–18).

More generally, positive explanatory responses would go like this:

The skeptic argues that premise 1; premise 2; premise 3;... and so C. We don't know that O. But what if knowledge required just so-and-so, and our situation were such-and-such? Then (say) premise 4 would be false and the skeptic's argument would fail, and, what's more, we would know that O. On my account, that's just what happens. And so that is my account of how, in the face of the skeptic's argument, we [might] know that O.

The bracketed "might" toward the end of the response can be included, or not, to taste, depending on how assertive the anti-skeptic is feeling, the less assertive following Nozick in presenting theirs as an account of how, in the face of the skeptical argument, knowledge is *possible*. (I've always taken it that a mere possibility is claimed largely to acknowledge the potentially disputed nature of the anti-skeptic's picture of our factual situation.)

To the extent that one's account is plausible, this could I suppose be counted as explaining, in the face of the skeptical argument in question, how it is that we [might] know what we take ourselves to know.

I have followed Nozick in some important ways in how I approach skepticism. Like Nozick and others before me and around me, as we have seen, I eschew attempts at non-question-begging refutations of skepticism or proofs that the skeptic is wrong. And like Nozick, what I instead offer is an *explanation*, based on ideas about what is involved in knowledge. But there has also been a crucial difference. Where Nozick seeks to explain *how it is that we know*, for dialectical reasons we have seen, my focus instead has been on explaining *why it can seem that we don't know*: To explain away the intuitive appeal of the skeptic's case. If it's premise 4, say, of the skeptic's argument that we're going to deny, and that premise can seem quite plausible, I want to account for why, despite being false, that premise is tempting. We can call this the "negative explanatory approach" to skepticism. (And as we've seen, an important element of Nozick's view is central to my endeavors. So I have found part of Nozick's treatment of knowledge and skepticism to be better suited to the negative explanatory task that I have adopted than to the positive one he himself attempted.)

To quickly review Nozick's own treatment of AI and my complaints about it: Nozick denies AI's second premise. He admits the plausibility of what he's denying. In fact, he likens the closure principle on which this premise could be based, in terms of its "intuitive appeal," to a steamroller.² But following the positive explanatory methodology I ascribed to him above, he denies it because his account of knowledge

² "Uncovering difficulties in the details of particular formulations of [closure principle] P will not weaken the principle's intuitive appeal; such quibbling will seem at best like a wasp attacking a steamroller, at worst like an effort in bad faith to avoid being pulled along by the skeptic's argument" (Nozick 1981: 206).

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