The Radical *Sceptical* Argument

We can roughly express the sceptical argument in the following way:

Premise 1: We are unable to know the denials of sceptical hypotheses.

Premise 2: If we are unable to know the denials of sceptical hypotheses, then we are unable to know anything of substance about the world.

Conclusion: Hence, we are unable to know anything of substance about the world.

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The premises are plausible, but the result is very counterintuitive. That's why this kind of argument is often called the sceptical **paradox**.

Is premise 2 too demanding? If so, why? How could we know normal things about the world if we don't know we're not radically deceived?

Can you formulate a sceptical hypothesis of your own and use it as part of a radical sceptical argument?

How should this paradox be *resolved*?
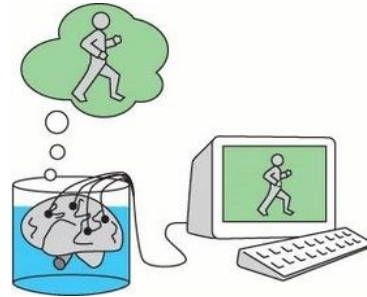
While some epistemologists focus on what knowledge *is*, others attempt to show, contrary to certain sceptical challenges, that we have any at all. One such challenge **radical scepticism**. There are two main components to radical sceptical arguments. The first component concerns what is called a **sceptical hypothesis**, a scenario in which you are radically deceived about the world and yet your experiences are just as they would be were you not being radically deceived. (For example, a scenario where you are really just a **brain in a vat** being led to think you are experiencing the things you seem to experience). The first key claim of the sceptical argument is that we are unable to know the denials of sceptical hypotheses like this. The second component involves the claim that if we are unable to know the denials of sceptical hypotheses, then it follows that we are unable to know very much at all. (After all, if I don't know I'm not a brain in a vat, then how can I know that what is in front of me is a hand?)

Responding to the Gettier Problem

Although the Gettier problem can be put simply, it turned out that responding to the problem in a satisfactory way has been very difficult. One strategy has been to try to 'tweak' the classical account of knowledge. For example, we might try to say that knowledge is justified true belief that is not based on any false presuppositions. (After all, in the clock case, you have the false presupposition that the clock is working). The problem is, however, that it's difficult to spell out the relevant notion of 'presupposition' so as to rule-out the clock case from counting as knowledge while not *also* ruling out a lot of beliefs we think we plausibly *do* know, but which also have false presuppositions lurking in the background. Another strategy has been to not just 'tweak' the classical account, but to give up on it altogether.

Even a stopped clock sometimes tells the right time

the GETTIER PROBLEM

In 1963, Edmund Gettier (b. 1927) wrote a 3-page paper that completely changed epistemology. He raised **counterexamples** against the classical account of knowledge by showing that you could have a justified true belief and yet still lack knowledge because your true belief was ultimately gained through luck. For example, suppose you go downstairs and see that a reliable clock reads '8:20' and hence come to believe that it is '8:20'. Your belief is true because it is 8:20, and it's justified because you believe it for good reasons. Suppose, however, that, unbeknownst to you, the clock stopped 24 hours earlier, and so you are forming your justified true belief by looking at a stopped clock. Your true belief is clearly a matter of luck, even though it's both justified and true. The moral of the story: **knowledge must be more than justified true belief**.

Some basic distinctions…

Epistemologists are usually concerned with a kind of knowledge called *propositional knowledge*, which is the kind of knowledge you have when you know *that* **something is true**. This is different from knowing *how* to do something (ability knowledge) and knowing a friend (acquaintance knowledge).

THE CLASSICAL ACCOUNT OF KNOWLEDGE

Many philosophers, including Plato, have thought of knowledge as having 'three parts': **belief, truth, and justification.** The idea is that you can't know *that* (for example) Paris is the capital of France *unless* you believe that it is (belief), Paris *really is* the capitol of France (truth), and you have *good reason* to believe that this is so (justification). On the classical account, **justified true belief** is not only necessary for knowing a proposition, but also **sufficient**; that is, if you have a justified, true belief, you have knowledge. As we'll see, though, **this simple account might not be right**. Knowledge might require more.
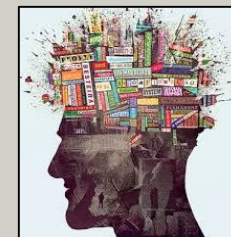
What is *knowledge*? Do we have any?

What is the *nature* of knowledge? Can we be sure that we have any knowledge? Are there any good reasons to think that knowledge is *impossible*?