

# Knowledge and Reality A: Lecture Ten

## 1. Radical Scepticism

The thesis of radical scepticism is that we don't know anything (and there's no convincing pragmatist-style explanation of how to live without etc.) So sceptics believe we don't know anything. Perhaps you're actually David Cameron who last night bought some 'first year sat in a lecture' drugs. That could be true – at least if the drugs were *really* convincing. So you should believe:

**Radical Scenario:** For any proposition P, you don't know you're actually in a situation where  $\sim P$  is the case.

This even works for mathematical propositions and other *a priori* 'logical truths'. We can hypnotise you to forget numbers, so you count all wrong. In which case, even though you currently think you're counting right, you could be counting wrong.

Scepticism needs more than that premise! **As it stands that it not an argument for scepticism.** Add in the following:

**Closure:** If an agent knows P and knows  $P \rightarrow Q$ , then the agent knows Q.

**Radical Scenario** plus **Closure** results in radical scepticism. The proof is easy. Imagine you knew that  $2+2=4$ . You also know that if  $2+2=4$  then you've not in a radical scenario where Derren Brown (or someone) has hypnotised you into believing a falsehood about what you get when you add 2 and 2 together. Given Closure, if those antecedents held, you'd know that you weren't being hypnotised. But as you *don't* know that you aren't being hypnotised (that is, you believe **Radical Scenario**) it follows that you don't know that  $2+2=4$ .

Again: given **Radical Scenario** you don't know that you're in a computer simulation, and everyone else is just a computer construct. So you don't know that the people around you, and that exist elsewhere in the world, really do exist. That is, you don't know there are other people. Given **Closure**, if you knew people in the third world were dying and needed your help and charity you'd know that there were other people. But we just said you *didn't* know that. So it follows that you don't know that people in the third-world are dying.

## 2. No-one Believes It

Next, I've talked about this *as if there were sceptics*. There aren't – not really. Scepticism is something you're meant to prove wrong – I expect you to approach it in the same manner. Why? Well, first I just don't believe people when they expect me to believe they think scepticism is plausible. If you really believe it, then presumably you don't know that giving me all your money will cause you any problems. If your actions don't signal you *really* believe it, presumably you don't, and what you've said lacks conviction. And that's hardly a sign of a serious academic. Imagine a physicist detected an asteroid coming to collide with the Earth – you'd be somewhat put out if he didn't then take his conclusion seriously and, say, *tell someone about it*. Same here. If you take radical scepticism seriously, you're going to approach life very differently. Of course you might start telling me a story about how, even though you think scepticism is true, you shouldn't change anything you do (and keep your wallet to yourself) A sophisticated version of that is fine. If it's more like a pragmatist story, that's fine. But a brute denial is just... childish.

Second reason: epistemologists have a job to do. If a physicist observed X and we asked him to explain why, and he said 'I dunno, so I suppose it hasn't occurred', we'd tell him to go back and try harder. We observe that we know things. We want the epistemologist to tell us *how* that happens, even in light of **Radical Scenario** and **Closure**. Saying 'I don't know, so I don't think we do know things in the first place' is a bit crap.

## 3. Deny Closure

If **Closure** were false, we'd have no problem. But it seems pretty obviously true doesn't it? If Wile E Coyote knows that lifting a weight above Road Runner and letting go would cause it to drop **and** Wile E Coyote knows that if it dropped, it'd kill Road Runner **surely** he then knows that dropping the weight will kill Road Runner? If I know that raising Graduate Contributions will enrage students *and* I know that if students are enraged then they'll protest it's *odd* to then think I don't then know that they're going to protest.

## 4. Deny Radical Scenario

You might want to deny the other premise. That looks hard – surely we *don't* know that we aren't in a computer simulation / aren't someone taking hallucinogenic drugs / aren't a pan galactic butterfly etc. Moore embraces **Closure** (not that he'd have recognised the principle *per se*).

He then reasons thus: I know I have a hand; If I have a hand, then there must be an external world (and I'm not living in a computer simulation etc.); Therefore: I know I'm not living in a computer simulation (or what have you)

Which works for everything so denies **Radical Scenario**. Is that a good argument? It's using the same main premise used to motivate radical scepticism, namely **Closure**. So if *this* isn't a good argument, then why does the sceptic get to have *their* argument turn out to be sound?

### 5. Deny the argument is valid

Tricky. It *seems* valid. It seems to be a simple instance of *modus tollens*. Given **Closure** if I knew I had a hand, I'd know I was in a computer simulation. I don't know that, so I don't know I have a hand. (Repeat for all other propositions). So the logical form looks valid. Time to let you into a little secret: there's more to validity than logical form.

#### *Context Shift in Arguments*

Imagine I buy a six pack, come home, and stick it in the fridge. 'All the beer is in the fridge' I declare. Is that true? Imagine a friend says: What about the beer in the supermarket? What about the beer in Guatemala? What about all the beer drunk during the 18th century? **NONE OF THAT IS IN THE FRIDGE!** That's kinda true. But it's kinda false. What's gone on is that the **context** has changed. In one context 'All the beer is in the fridge' is true, and in another it's false. But arguments can only be valid if they have a valid logical form **and the context remains fixed throughout**. Turn back to the beer argument. But imagine that we shift context in that argument. In one context the first premise is true. If we mean that I buy all the beer in a supermarket and bung it in the fridge, I'll have a great night. But imagine that the second premise is true in a *different* context. I ram raid every shop in the world, and over the course of a year cram all the beer **in the world** into my fridge. The second premise is true, but in a different context. But because the context shifted, the conclusion no longer follows. I'm **not** going to have a fun, relaxing evening – my house is full of beer bottles, I can't even see the TV and the police are outside getting ready to have a word with me. So the lesson is that the truth value of a sentence can vary from context to context. And an argument is only valid if we keep the context fixed throughout. How's that help?

#### *Contextualism*

*Contextualists* think knowledge is context-dependent. Imagine I notice that there's scaffolding outside the bank. I go home and my friend asks me if the bank is open today. Perhaps I say it is, and it seems I *know* that it is – after all, so what if scaffolding is outside? That's not a reason to think it's not open! Now imagine the Mafia break in and pin me down, with a gun to my head. They tell me they need me to go and get money from the bank or it's concrete shoes time. Do I know now? Am I *that sure* that the scaffolding didn't indicate it was closed? Perhaps not...

So the contextualist argues that in one context I know that I have a hand (and  $2+2=4$  etc.) And in that context I know I'm not in a computer simulation. But when you watch *ExistenZ* or enter the philosophy room the context changes. Now you *don't* know these things. But it's just a result of context shift. Have fun reading about it.

### 6. Exam Details

The exam is 90 minutes long. It will be jointly examined with Knowledge and Reality B. There will be two sections. One on Knowledge and Reality A (epistemology) another on Knowledge and Reality B (metaphysics). You answer one question from each section. The questions will be on the *second* part of the course. So the first part of the course was covered by essay examination, the second part will be covered by the exam. So Induction, Scepticism, Paradoxes, Other Minds and the *a priori* will be what's on the exam.

Now, this limited scope for the exam means two things i) We expect *detailed* answers ii) the questions will be at a relatively high level of specificity. So you won't get particularly general questions such as 'Can we have inductive knowledge?' or 'Can we know things *a priori*?'. .

### 7. Example Questions

'Evaluate Reichenbach's response to Hume's problem of induction'; 'Evaluate Mill's solution to the problem of other minds.' etc. So the questions will be relatively specific. But there are only four topics on the second half of the course. With only a few issues involved in each of them. So there's not *that* many things to revise. Remember, you only have to answer one question. So if you revise three answers to relatively specific questions you'll almost certainly find at least one coming up on the exam.

### 8. Exam Preparation

So how do you prepare? Write them as you would an essay: the exam requires essay-style answers. That means forming *an argument*. That means *going beyond the lecture material for a good mark*. Don't have to revise them word for word. And the mark you receive for an exam answer will always be higher than it would've for an essay.

**IF YOU WAIT UNTIL TWO DAYS BEFORE THE EXAM TO WRITE THESE EXAM ANSWERS, YOU ARE A MORON.**