

# Moore's paradox, pragmatic indefensibility and skepticism

Philipp Keller

University of Geneva, Switzerland

philipp.keller@lettres.unige.ch

Wittgenstein Symposium, Kirchberg, August 4, 2003



## Moore's paradox

(1)  $p$ , but I do not believe that  $p$

*Belief approach:*

- one should believe what one asserts
- believing a conjunction entails believing its conjuncts
- believing that one does not believe that  $p$  entails that one does not believe that  $p$

*Knowledge approach:*

- one should only assert what one knows
- knowing a conjunction entails knowing its conjuncts
- knowing entails truly believing

(2)  $p$ , but I do not know that  $p$

(3)  $p$ , but I do not entertain (the thought) that  $p$

*Pragmatic indefensibility:* an assertion is defective if it is for reasons internal to it unable to convince, i.e. if it undermines the supposition that there are reasons to believe what is asserted. An assertion that  $p$  is proper only if  $p$  is compatible with everything I take myself to know.

## Choosing the framework

A *doxastic alternative* for  $a$  at  $t$  is a possible world the actuality of which  $a$  cannot (and should not) rule out given what he thinks to know at  $t$  about the world he takes to be actual.

$$(4) \quad w \models Bp \quad :\Leftrightarrow \quad \forall v (wDAv \rightarrow v \models p)$$

$$(5) \quad w \models Dp \quad :\Leftrightarrow \quad \exists v (wDAv \wedge v \models \neg p)$$

Two interpretations of “a way the actual world could have been (given what we know about it)”:

- **externalist interpretation:** anything which is compatible with our knowledge might be the world we happen to inhabit
- **internalist interpretation:** a possible world which we could take ourselves to inhabit and which is compatible with what we think we know

## Pragmatic indefensibility

Why is (1) indefensible?

- because DA is transitive
- (better:) because it can only be believed in worlds which are contradictory or inaccessible to themselves

If I assert that  $p$ , I thereby commit myself to the claim that  $p$  might be true even if everything I take myself to know about the actual world were true (if the actual world were my only doxastic alternative).

(1) cannot be rationally believed in 'reflexive' worlds, i.e. worlds  $w$  such that  $wDAw$ .

(6) I believe that  $p$ , but I do not disbelieve that  $\neg p$ .

(6) can be believed only in worlds which have only worlds as doxastic alternatives which themselves have no doxastic alternatives.

(7)  $p$ , but I do not disbelieve that  $\neg p$ .

(7) can only be believed in worlds which only have doxastic alternatives that are doxastically inaccessible to themselves.

$w \models Bp \wedge \neg Bp$       $w$  is contradictory

$w \models p \wedge \neg Bp$       $w$  is inaccessible to itself or contradictory

$w \models Bp \wedge \neg D\neg p$      all of  $w$ 's doxastic alternatives are dead ends

$w \models p \wedge \neg D\neg p$       $w$  has only doxastic alternatives which are inaccessible to themselves

## Framing the sceptical question

A sceptic is someone who believes that no one ever knows something.

The sceptical question is: “How do you know that you know something?”

### **Proposed strategy:**

Dodge the question by justifying our preexisting belief that the sceptic is wrong.

### **Dilemma:**

Either we find a hidden contradiction in what the sceptic presents as possible or else we simply declare our psychological inability to believe him.

### **Solution:**

View scepticism as an epidemic: we do not have to convince those among us who are already infected with the sceptical virus; instead, we have to prevent the sceptical disease from propagating, i.e. to detain the sceptics among us of convincing others. We have to win a three-person game between the sceptic, the antiseptic and the innocent bystander – show to the innocent bystander that skepticism requires a leap of faith.

## Meeting the sceptics' challenge

*What the sceptic wants the innocent bystander to say:*

I am not deluded, but I do not disbelieve that I am deluded.

$$\neg p \wedge \neg Dp$$

*The problem with (7):*

- It can only be believed in worlds which have only doxastic alternatives that are inaccessible to themselves.
- It can only be true *and* believed in worlds which are 'anti-symmetric' (such that every doxastic alternative to them does not have them among its doxastic alternatives).

*What the sceptic wants:*

That we suspend our confidence in our knowledge claims, i.e. accept the following:

(8) I know that  $p$ , but (for the sake of the argument) I do not  
disbelieve that I do not know that  $p$ .

If we are to accept (8), however, we believe that we know that  $p$  and that at the same time we suspend our negative answer to the sceptics' suggestion that we do not actually know that  $p$ . Such a belief, however, can only be true *and* believed in worlds which are 'anti-symmetric'. Belief in (7) requires a leap of faith and (8) asks us to take this leap. (8) asks us to epistemically place ourselves in worlds from which there is no road back to the world where we take ourselves to be. And we are within our rights to refuse such an invitation to a take a leap of faith.

## Conclusion

There is an answer to the sceptical challenge.

