

Inductive Skepticism and Starting-Point Epistemology

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A banality

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Starting-point epistemology (SPE) (Azzouni [2025](#), 7):

- (I) “Any cognitive agent *must* have some occurrent knowledge or other.”

- (II) “Cognitively sophisticated agents ... *should assume they have knowledge.*”

Question

How far can SPE take us?

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Can it be used to address other kinds of skepticism?

Can it be used to address *inductive* skepticism?

Inductive skepticism and the Uniformity of Nature

Set up

Alina takes herself to know that the sun will rise tomorrow.

Why?

The sun rises because of to the rotation of the earth, and while the earth could stop rotating, that would require either that we're massively wrong about the laws of nature or the existence of an object (e.g., a comet) that we almost certainly would have detected, etc.

Karl's argument

- (P1) Alina knows that the sun will rise tomorrow only if she is justified in assuming that nature is uniform.
 - (P2) Alina cannot justify the assumption that nature is uniform using deduction from first principles, because differences are *possible*.
 - (P3) Alina cannot justify the assumption using induction, on pain of circularity.
- ∴ (C) Alina does not know that the sun will rise tomorrow.

Against (P1)

Wesley Salmon (1953) showed that (P1) is ridiculous.

No one expects nature to be *uniform*.

We always expect some uniformities and some differences.

The importance of SPE, part 1

According to SPE, Karl's challenge is only successful if Alina actually presupposes the uniformity of nature.

But she doesn't: her assumptions relate to things like forces and laws, not "nature" writ large.

Since the burden of proof lies on Karl, Alina can continue to take herself to know.

Karl's rejoinders

Rejoinder 1

Put aside the uniformity of nature. The real problem is that induction cannot be justified.

STANDARD: if inductive inferences provide knowledge, you should be able to give a non-circular argument for the reliability or trustworthiness of induction.

Alina's response

STANDARD is unreasonable, at least as it is applied here.

Carroll (1895) showed that the deductive analogue of STANDARD fails: we require at least some deductive resources to justify the use of deduction.

So we should *tollens* Karl's *ponens*: since deduction is clearly justified, STANDARD cannot be right.

The importance of SPE, part 2

This is not an argument for the reliability or trustworthiness of inductive inference.

All Alina has done is rebut Karl's challenge.

But that's enough according to SPE.

Rejoinder 2

The arguments Karl has given don't just apply to the sun rising tomorrow – they apply to all inductive knowledge.

Since Alina's (alleged) knowledge of the sun rising relies on other pieces of inductive knowledge, Karl's argument undercuts *all* of it.

Essentially: the challenge is not to Alina's knowledge *per se*, but to the method she uses.

Alina's response: a dilemma

Either

- (a) Karl grants that Alina's assumptions are sufficient to justify her belief that the sun will rise tomorrow – in which case Karl is no longer arguing against *induction*, but against the foundations of Alina's knowledge. (That is: Agrippa, not Hume.)
- (b) Karl doesn't grant that Alina's assumptions are sufficient – in which case the rejoinder offers nothing new.

SPE and the third-person perspective

Three concerns

- (1) I haven't really invoked SPE, just the relativized burden of proof.
- (2) I haven't shown that *we* should think that Alina has knowledge, just that *she* should.
- (3) I haven't shown that Karl's position is wrong, just that he can't force Alina out of hers.

The first two concerns

We (at least: *I*) are in the same position as Alina: we take ourselves to know that the sun will rise tomorrow.

Since Alina has rebutted Karl's arguments, SPE holds that our starting point remains as secure as hers.

So from where *we* stand, Alina has good reasons for believing the sun will rise tomorrow – not just true belief, but knowledge properly so-called.

What of Karl?

Presumably, Karl used to be like us, dogmatically slumbering under the assumption that the sun would rise tomorrow.

If SPE is right, then what the foregoing arguments show is that *Karl has made a mistake*.

Not just: he's argued himself into a bad philosophical position, but: that argument *shouldn't* have convinced him.

Conclusion

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There's more work to be done here, obviously; and much the work that I have done draws from sources other than *Challenging Knowledge*.

But it seems to me that SPE is a key piece in bringing these disparate threads together and showing that inductive skepticism should not move us – at least not those of us who start out assuming that we know the sun will rise tomorrow.

- Azzouni, Jody (2025). *Challenging Knowledge: How We (Sometimes) Don't Know What We Think We Know*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Carroll, Lewis (1895). What the Tortoise said to Achilles. *Mind* 4.14: 278–80.
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