

CHAPTER 7. SKEPTICISM

Skeptical puzzle. Smith believes *it is .6 likely that Jones smokes*. This probabilistic belief can be knowledge. Smith also believes Jones *might not* smoke—indeed, that there's a *significant chance* that Jones doesn't smoke. However, if Jones *doesn't* smoke, then it's not more likely than not that Jones smokes. And so, if Jones doesn't smoke, then it's not .6 likely that Jones smokes. How, then, can Smith's initial probabilistic belief count as knowledge?

This skeptical puzzle is a mixture of **four skeptical arguments** against probabilistic knowledge. (And, particularly: the claim that Smith knows *it is .6 likely that Jones smokes*.)

Argument from inconsistency. Smith's belief *it is .6 likely that Jones smokes* is inconsistent: it entails the possibility that it itself is wrong and thereby entails a contradiction.

- (1)
 - a. It is .6 likely that Jones smokes.
 - b. Hence it is .4 likely that Jones doesn't smoke.
 - c. Hence it might be that Jones doesn't smoke.
 - d. Hence it might not be .6 likely that Jones smokes.
 - e. So, it is .6 likely and might not be .6 likely that Jones smokes.

(1a) entails a contradiction, namely, (1e). Contents which entail contradictions cannot be *true*, and, in turn, cannot be *known*. Since the content of the probabilistic belief *it is .6 likely that Jones smokes* entails a contradiction, it cannot be true, and, in turn, cannot be known.

Reply. The skeptic misdiagnoses (1-e): it is not a contradiction. Smith can consistently believe *it is .6 likely that Jones smokes* and *it might not be .6 likely that Jones smokes*. Example: Smith may have a .6 credence that Jones smokes while believing that, conditional on Brown smoking, it is .9 likely that Jones smokes. *Any moderate credence that Jones smokes is consistent with the belief that Jones might not smoke*.

Argument from closure. Smith's probabilistic belief *it might not be .6 likely that Jones smokes* may not be inconsistent with his *.6 credence that Jones smokes*, but it can still keep said credence from constituting knowledge: believing *it might not be .6 likely that Jones smokes* means it's possible that *it's certain that Jones doesn't smoke*. Before Smith can know *it's .6 likely that Jones smokes*, he must rule out *Jones certainly doesn't smoke*.

- (2)
 - a. If Smith knows it's .6 likely that Jones smokes, then Smith knows it's not the case that Jones certainly doesn't smoke.
 - b. Smith doesn't know *it's not the case that Jones certainly doesn't smoke*.
 - c. Therefore, Smith doesn't know that it is .6 likely that Jones smokes.

It is .6 likely that Jones smokes entails *it's not the case that Jones certainly doesn't smoke*. Assuming Smith knows this entailment holds, and some epistemic closure principle is operative,

Smith can know the former only if he knows the latter. Since he doesn't know the latter, he cannot know the former.

The divine, the pious, and the heretical. A probability space is *divine* just in case exactly one world is in its domain. A set of probability spaces is *pious* just in case it contains some divine probability space. A set of probability spaces is *heretical* just in case it is not pious (which includes all *thoroughly probabilistic contents*).

Heretical contents cannot be believed by a subject who is certain about exactly which world is actual, e.g., *God*. They *can* be believed by a subject who *is not* certain about exactly which world is actual. But, they cannot be *known* if the subject unless they can rule out that God believes otherwise, which is impossible. The argument from closure, then, problematizes *knowledge of heretical contents* (i.e., *thoroughly probabilistic contents*).

Reply. Resources for responding to the traditional skeptical argument from closure against *propositional* knowledge are available for responding to the argument against *probabilistic* knowledge (e.g., epistemic contextualist story, interest-relative invariantist story, etc.).

Argument from disjunction. Smith's probabilistic belief *it is .6 likely that Jones smokes* fails to be knowledge because its probabilistic content cannot be true.

- (8)
- a. Either Jones smokes or Jones doesn't smoke.
 - b. If Jones smokes, then it is not .6 likely that Jones smokes.
 - c. If Jones doesn't smoke, then it is not .6 likely that Jones smokes.
 - d. Therefore, it is not .6 likely that Jones smokes.
 - e. Therefore, Smith doesn't know that it is .6 likely that Jones smokes.

With respect to Jones smoking, there are only two way things could turn out: either Jones smokes or Jones doesn't smoke. And, given either disjunct, the probabilistic content *it is .6 likely that Jones smokes* is false—indeed, *God knows* it is false. Thus, Smith cannot know it.

Reply. Though this appears to be an instance of constructive dilemma, and in turn a valid inference, it is neither because it equivocates: the premises are naturally interpreted as *conditional credences* while conclusion is naturally interpreted as *all-things-considered credences*.

Misconceptions about probabilistic truth conditions. Tempting to think probabilistic content is true *iff* it contains the probability space according to which the actual world is certain. *Put differently:* it's tempting think probabilistic content is true *iff* God believes it. *This is misguided.* Probabilistic contents are *not* true in virtue of containing the objective chance function or the probability space according to which the world is certain.

What if you can't shake the feeling that probabilistic truth conditions should be a function of which world is actual? That they should track what God believes? That'd be to forget the place of probabilistic-thought and talk in practical reasoning.

Practical role of probabilistic beliefs. Probabilistic-thought and -talk is supposed to facilitate the practical reasoning of finite cognitive agents. Noting God doesn't hold our probabilistic beliefs is *unhelpful* and *beside the point*: the only reason God doesn't have probabilistic beliefs is that He has perfect knowledge of the world. And, the only reason we have and need to work with thoroughly probabilistic beliefs is that we lack said knowledge.

Argument from safety. Suppose Smith believes *it is .6 likely that Jones smokes* because Jones flipped a coin in order to decide whether to quit smoking, and Smith knows that the coin is biased in favor of smoking, with .4 objective chance that it will land heads and cause Jones to quit smoking. Though the target probabilistic content may be true at the actual world, there's some nearby world at which it's not true, but Smith believes it anyway. Smith's .6 credence that Jones smokes is *unsafe*. Insofar as there's a safety condition on knowledge, Smith's .6 credence that Jones smokes cannot count as knowledge.

- a) If Smith knows that it is .6 likely that Jones smokes, then there's no close world where he falsely believes that it is .6 likely that Jones smokes.
- b) There *is* a close world where Smith *falsely believes* it is .6 likely that Jones smokes.
- c) Therefore, Smith does not know that it is .6 likely that Jones smokes.

Reply. The truth value of (b) is *context sensitive*: it depends on which ways of thinking of the target objects (in this case, *possible worlds*) are relevant in the given context. And so, though there are contexts in which (b) is true and Smith's .6 credence that Jones smokes fails to be safe and, in turn, fails to count as knowledge, there are contexts in which it is false and Smith's credence is safe and counts as knowledge.

An example of a context in which it is false: a context in which we have assumed that all close worlds are such that Jones in fact flipped a biased coin in order to decide whether to quit smoking. **Salient question:** how to represent which possible worlds are close and which worlds are not? Do claims about what close worlds are like correspond to ways the pluriverse may be configured or organized?

*To get here Moss takes a detour to discuss hyperintensionality via her treatment of the lottery case. "Probably" creates a hyperintensional context, in that "the substitution of necessarily co-referring (or logically equivalent) expressions in the scope of 'probably' can change the truth value of the sentence that contains it" (133).

Strange results.

- ☉ God cannot be omniscient: God doesn't believe probabilistic contents and so cannot know them. We have knowledge that God does not have.
- ☉ Gaining knowledge about the world usually involves losing probabilistic knowledge. Probability knowledge is temporary and gives way to propositional knowledge.