

The questions “Do we have knowledge?” (“Is knowledge possible? - Is anything we believe an instance of ‘knowledge’?”) or “Do we have truth?” (“Is truth possible? – Is anything we believe an instance of ‘true’ belief?”) are nonsense questions. -Any sense we could give to the sounds being voiced or the marks-on-paper being written in setting forth these questions would presume / affirm that we do have knowledge and can make true statements. **We *undeniably* do have (some) knowledge and do possess (some) beliefs that are true.**

The ‘Hard Skeptic’ (‘HS’) says the words - and *tries to assert* - that “We do not have knowledge / knowledge-beliefs are not possible” and “We do not have truth / true beliefs are not possible.”

[Contrast HS to the ‘Soft Skeptic’ who argues that we cannot justify many particular claims to knowledge or truth, thus we cannot justify a claim that there is general ‘knowledge’ or ‘truth.’ The Soft Skeptic does not deny that there may be ‘knowledge’ or ‘truth,’ but does deny that we are in a position to affirm / believe that there is general knowledge and truth.]

Because HS is a skeptic, s/he is also a relativist: What people believe or claim to know is held to be a relative matter (to the individual or to the group), not based upon any universal, objective, ‘true’ or ‘known’ criteria.

### **Argument #1:**

**HS could not speak or write, much less assert** their claim *unless they had some knowledge* of the meaning of the words used, of grammatical rules, of the existence of the paper, the pen with which to write, the audience to be addressed, etc. HS could not assert that their claim is correct unless statements regarding the claim and its context were *taken as true*.

**The audience could not read / hear and understand** the hard skeptic’s claim / statement without having *some knowledge* of the meaning of words and of grammatical rules , existence of the speaker, etc. and without some statements about these matters being *taken as true*.

**One could not find oneself agreeing or disagreeing** with the previous statements in this argument unless one assumed that their understanding of a statement was correct (“That’s true!”) and they were either affirming the statement’s correctness (= “It’s true!”) or its supposed falsity (= “It’s not true – It’s false!”)

### **Argument #2:**

Of any statement that HS might make, such as “We do not have knowledge” or “There is no such thing as truth / ‘true’ belief, the non-skeptic can ask:

**“Is the statement you just made true? – Or is it a mere belief or opinion?”** If it is mere belief or opinion -if you do not hold that it is true - why should the non-skeptic take it seriously and accept it as their belief / opinion?

**“Is the statement you just made false?”** If it is, *why should the non-skeptic accept a false statement as their belief / opinion?*

**If the statement you made is not false**, then again, **is it true?** - **If so, the non-skeptic should not accept it, for it is self-refuting.** And in making the statement, **HS has engaged in performative (as well as logical) self-contradiction.**

And if HS claims that statements have **some other truth status** than those which a ‘bivalent account’ (true-or- false) recognizes, **do you know this? Is it true** that it has this third status?

### **Argument #3:**

Skeptics who deny that we have knowledge or truth **because they cannot give an adequate account of HOW** we have knowledge or truth would be like someone who is lost and does not remember / know how they got to their present location L. Because they cannot account for how they got lost, they conclude that *they do not know that they are lost* and that it is not true that they are lost. Because they cannot give an adequate account of HOW they got to their present location L, they could deny the FACT that they occupy present position L. They do not know that they have a location and it is not true that they have a location!

This is obviously absurd. ***Just because one cannot give an analysis of P or thinks that they cannot explain HOW one knows P*** (based upon empiricist assumptions, for instance)***or how one can explain the truth of P*** (based upon a correspondence theory of truth, for instance) **does not logically entail that one does not / cannot know P, or that one does not / cannot know anything at all, or that nothing is true at all.**

An inability on the part of the non-skeptic to demonstrate conclusively that they know-that-they-know any particular claim does not constitute a refutation – or even a good reason – to assert that knowledge of a particular claim is not possible. An inability on the part of the non-skeptic to demonstrate conclusively that we can know-that-we-know (in general) does not constitute a refutation – or even a good reason – to assert that knowledge (in general) is not possible.

***Knowing*** that P is one issue. ***Knowing-that- one- knows*** P is another.

### **Other considerations:**

Perhaps some skeptics are laboring with **“intellectual baggage”** that may be associated with some types of claims to knowledge and truth:

Perhaps they are concerned that if one claims to know something, one will think that they cannot possibly be wrong and thus not open to objection to, disproof of, or revision of one’s claim to know. In other words, claims to know and to have truth will be **the basis or motivation to embrace dogmatism.**

**But one does not have to be a skeptic or a relativist to avoid dogmatism. One can be a ‘fallibilist’** – one who claims to know for good reasons but is open to objections and disproof, and thus to revision or rejection of their claim because they recognize the possibility that they could be wrong.

Indeed, the desire for and the affirmation of having an open mind, of not being dogmatic, of being open to revision of one’s beliefs, *assumes and only makes sense upon the assumption that knowledge and truth are possible and desirable*. And that error and falsity are undesirable. They do not make much sense on an assumption that we cannot know and are not capable of truth.

Perhaps the skeptic is **committed to tolerance**.

Tolerance is seen as a good thing. Claims to knowledge or to truth are seen by HS as exclusionary and leading to intolerance. But claims to knowledge and truth do not entail intolerance for a non-skeptical fallibilist. There is *no logical connection* between “T is true” and an intolerant “I cannot possibly be wrong in my belief that T is true – you must accept and live by my claim!” There need be *no psychological connection* between claims to truth and dogmatism or intolerance on the part of a fallibilist. In fact, “People should be tolerant!” is best promoted and protected if it is claimed as a true statement and a claim to ethics- knowledge!

Perhaps it is **a particular account of knowledge or truth** that gives offense.

Perhaps one assumes that knowledge and truth must be some kind of metaphysical entities, like the forms of Plato’s metaphysic. Because one finds the particular metaphysic to be incredible, and its metaphysical account of knowledge and truth unacceptable, one thinks that one must – or can – reject any conception of knowledge or truth. Perhaps one also thinks (naively and erroneously) that in doing so, one is not *accepting other* metaphysical assumptions and *acting as if* those metaphysical assumptions are true and known!

Perhaps the skeptic is **at heart a ‘romantic’** in one’s intellectual life.

HS likes to think new and creative thoughts and to accept and live out new and creative ideas – the ones that seem to be most appealing personally, existentially, and aesthetically. HS does not want issues of knowledge and truth to get in the way of their creativity and freedom. One certainly has the right to one’s romantic desires and choices and lifestyle – as a person and even as an academic – but *one should be clear about what one is doing* and not engage in the rationalization that there is no, and can be no, such things as knowledge and truth.

Or perhaps the skeptic is **a committed egoist and a relativist**.

HS wants to believe what HS believes and to do what HS does, *without issues of knowledge and truth a (and thus ethical knowledge and truth) getting in the way of HS’s self-will*. Again, one certainly has the legal right to egoistic and relativistic desires, choices, and lifestyle, but one should be *clear that one is indeed making egoistic choices* and not engage in the rationalization that there is no, or can be no such thing as knowledge or truth.

Or perhaps the skeptic is simply **an ‘intellectual hedonist.’**

HS believes what it “feels good to believe.” It feels good to HS to believe that there is no knowledge and truth. It feels good to HS to deny that there is knowledge and truth. Arguing for one’s skepticism and relativism does not feel good to HS. Recognizing knowledge and truth as constraints upon belief does not feel good to HS. So HS rejects the possibility of knowledge and truth – it “feels good” to HS to reject the possibility of knowledge and truth.

Perhaps the skeptic is **a epistemic subjectivist and/or an emotivist . . .**

. . . when it comes to speaking of their skepticism. HS does not claim to know that “We cannot have knowledge.” HS does not claim that it is true that “We cannot have knowledge.” These are statements that the hard skeptic *merely accepts or embraces*. HS “declares” their skepticism, not to assert or to argue, but merely *to express* HS’s ‘skepticism- attitude / feelings.’ Or perhaps HS speaks *to influence others emotionally* to embrace HS’s skepticism. But the non-skeptic, one who is ‘skeptical-concerning-skepticism-and-skeptics,’ will not be impressed by, nor embrace the views of, nor be much influenced by any such expressions of personal, arbitrary subjectivism on the part of HS.

If any of the above are true, then . . .

***One cannot reason or argue a committed ‘hard skeptic’ out of a position that they have not accepted on the basis of reason or argument and will not defend by reason or argument.*** Such hard skeptics are invulnerable to rational challenge or to change. Such persons must therefore be left to live-out their hard skepticism, with their rationalization of skepticism (rationalizing rejection of knowledge and truth) that goes with it.

**‘Knowledge’** includes factual beliefs / claims / statements that are true and that claim and assume to “tell us how the world is.” (Our beliefs and knowledge-statements need not be exactly true or held to “mirror” the world with exactitude. We can know P to be the case without knowing that P is *exactly* the case or naively claiming that P *exhaustively states* “what is the case.”)

- **That we know some things is beyond assertive denial.**

(“We cannot / do not know anything” can be said / written – but it cannot be asserted.)

- **“Do we know anything?” is not a good question.**

- **“What do we know?” is a good question.** (- As is: “What do we not know?”)

- **“How do we know?” is a good question.** (- As is: “How do we not gain knowledge?”)

- **“How we might know-that-we-know?” is another good question.**

(- As is: “How might we not know-that-we-know?”)

- **“What are the limits to knowing and to knowing-that-we-know?” are good questions.**

**Being skeptical about particular claims** with reference to particular good questions is always a possible and often an appropriate response. But **being a skeptic regarding the general existence of knowledge or truth** is neither a possible nor an appropriate assumption or conclusion.

**In every thought we think, in every word we speak, and in every action we perform we assume that we have (some) knowledge of the world and possess (some) true beliefs about the world.** To deny that we can have knowledge of the world or possess true beliefs about the world is beyond the possibility of assertion, though not beyond one's ability to speak the words / make the statements. **We simply cannot assert-deny** that we possess knowledge of the world and true beliefs about the world.

That we **must assume** and cannot assert-deny we have knowledge / true beliefs and *does not prove* that **we do in fact** possess knowledge or true beliefs however. It does, however, refute the claim that we **do not in fact** possess knowledge or true beliefs.

**'Proof'** (intellectually responsible assertion) of actual possession of knowledge / true beliefs **requires argument** – requires providing **good reasons** for holding that knowledge of the world and true beliefs about the world are possible and also arguments providing **sufficient evidence** for specific instances of knowledge / true belief. I believe that such arguments / good reasons / sufficient evidence can be given.

***Start with the disjunction:***

**Either** we assert that (or, it is true that) "We can – do have knowledge"

**OR**

we assert that (or, it is true that) "We cannot - do not have knowledge.

**but**

**We cannot assert** that "We cannot - **do not** have knowledge.

**therefore**

**Necessarily, we must assert** that "We **can – do** have knowledge."

**Then**, can the 'necessity of asserting' that "We have knowledge":

1. ***Make sense*** in terms of **an account / epistemology** of HOW we have – gain such knowledge?
2. ***Demonstrate itself*** in the reality of particular instances of knowledge, by means of **an empirical -inductive inference?**

In answer to (1) above, **there are good accounts of knowledge that make sense** of our claim that knowledge is possible / we have knowledge (in a general sense of knowing – being able to know the world).

In answer to (2) above, given (1) and sufficient empirical evidence, one can conclude by means of **'inference to the best explanation'** that we do have specific instances of knowledge / true belief in specific cases.

So, 'Hard Skeptic,' where is your argument for your hard skepticism?

– How do you even get started in responding to this challenge?

-How do you explain the fact that you do understand this challenge?

(= *You understand* - know - "*make sense of*" *what I mean!*)

Do you give examinations in which you judge some answers to be correct and some to be incorrect?

What is the difference between a 'correct' answer and a 'true' answer? Between an 'incorrect' answer and a 'false' answer?

Are your judgments correct / true (or not) concerning the content and correctness / incorrectness of the students' answers?

Does it make sense to have 'True / False' questions and to ask for answers to these questions? – Of course it does!

**'Basic Beliefs' (see John Kekes)**

**= necessary and assert-orically undeniable**

**There are:**

**basic empirical-factual (aposteriori) beliefs**

**AND**

**basic normative (apriori) beliefs**

**'Truth'**

**At any time T, 'truth' will be the set of statements that are true at T.**

**Some of these will be 'indexed' for time, perspective, etc.**

**Others will be universal / timeless.**