

Work in Progress Talk: Chris Smith

TITLE: Seeking the Skeptical Problem

ABSTRACT: Most contemporary epistemologists conceive of skepticism as a thesis about knowledge--to the effect that we lack it. As these epistemologists see it, skeptics support their thesis with an argument, whose premises also discuss knowledge. I call this conception the Argumentative Conception of Skepticism, or ACS. On ACS, the problem of skepticism is that the skeptical argument is apparently valid with intuitively true premises and an intuitively false conclusion. The solution to the problem, according to ACS, is to develop a theory of knowledge that will refute the argument (usually by disproving one of the premises). I have a different conception of skepticism, the Undermining Conception of Skepticism, or UCS. On UCS, skepticism is a psychological state or event in which consideration of a skeptical hypothesis eradicates, weakens, or otherwise negatively impacts our beliefs. The problem of skepticism is that we are susceptible to having our beliefs undermined in this way. I will spend some time arguing for the possibility that UCS is right and ACS is wrong. If this is a genuine possibility, then it's possible that the skeptical problem has nothing to do with knowledge, and that epistemologists who theorize about knowledge in their attempts to solve the problem are wrongheaded. I will then spend a little bit of time arguing that, in fact, UCS is right and ACS is wrong. If that's true, then philosophers should seriously rethink their approach to the skeptical problem if they ever hope to solve it.