

Fallibilist Reliabilism and the Closure Principle (What do Brain-in-a-Vat arguments show?)

Starting point (a performative version of a fallibilist reliabilism): Saying 'I know/N knows that p ' isn't just making a factual statement, but claiming/attributing an *epistemic status*, *endorsing* my/N's belief that p as rationally arrived at and hence correct. Our standard of rationality here ensures general but not necessarily invariable reliability in delivering correct belief; but we do, and are expected to, credit N with success in 'getting it right' wherever there is no ground for doubt that the rational process has delivered the goods: we attribute or claim success if there's no reason not to – and a mere logical possibility doesn't count as a reason for doubt.

Task: to consider brain-in-a-vat arguments from this position. Closure Principle (CP): knowing (i) that p and (ii) that *that- p* entails *that- q* together entail knowing (iii) that q . Argument from Closure: put ' q ' = 'I am not a brain in a vat' ('NBV'), ' p ' = any perception-based proposition ('P'): I can't know (iii), I do know (ii), so I can't know (i). Response: CP does apply to content-entailments (e.g., 'N is a spinster' entails 'N is female'), but arguably not to a presuppositional entailment such as P's entailment of NBV.

The sceptic must convince us either by appeal to the standards of our own epistemic practice (internal argument), or by (external) attack on these standards as unsound. Our standards don't admit mere logical possibilities as a ground for doubt (internal closure argument blocked). But shouldn't they allow these (external challenge)? No, because requiring logical impossibility of error is in effect requiring removal of the logical gap between our view of reality and how reality actually is, a gap which is integral to the very concept of knowledge.