1. **A Skeptical Hypothesis**

The Brain in a Vat Hypothesis:

“Could you not be floating in a tank while super-psychologists stimulate your brain electrochemically to produce exactly the same experiences as you are now having, or even to produce the whole sequence of experiences you have had in your lifetime thus far?...[y]our experience would be exactly the same as it now is. So how can you know none of them is happening? Yet if you do not know these possibilities don't hold, how can you know you are reading this book now? If you do not know you haven't always been floating in the tank at the mercy of the psychologists, how can you know anything-what your name is, who your parents were, where you come from?” (Nozick)

2. **Closure Under Known Entailment (‘CUKE’)**

CUKE: If S knows that p, and S knows that p entails q, the S knows that q.

*e.g.* Suppose that p is the proposition that you are now reading a book and q is the proposition that you are not a brain in a vat.

So, if you know that you are reading a book,…

and you know that your reading a book entails that you are not a brain in a vat,…

then you know that you are not a brain in a vat.

So, if you know that you are reading a book, then you know that you are not a brain in a vat.

The skeptic claims:

You *don’t* know that you are not a brain in a vat.

Therefore, you don’t know that you are reading a book.

Nozick denies CUKE. How so?

3. **Nozick’s Denial of CUKE**

Nozick claims that S can know that p, and know that p entails q, yet *not* know that q.

That is, you can know that you are reading a book, and know that your reading a book entails that you are not a brain in a vat, all the while, not knowing whether you are a not a brain in a vat.

Nozick’s Conditions on Knowledge:

(1) P is true.
(2) S believes that p.
(3) If p were not true, S would not believe that p.
(4) If p were true, S would believe that p.

(3) and (4) are subjunctive conditionals. They are truth-tracking conditions on knowledge. They demand that our beliefs be sensitive to the truth. They happen to match the world right now and they are formed in a reliable way.

**How do we evaluate subjunctive conditionals for truth?**

Consider the following subjunctive conditional:

(a) If I had been born one week later, I would have the same birthday as my brother.

We think that this is a *true* subjunctive conditional. (It is! Trust me.) But it doesn’t express a logically necessary implication. We can imagine some scenario in which I was born a week later but in which my brother had been born a month later than he was. But the fact that in this scenario the antecedent of the conditional is true and the consequent is false does not show that the subjunctive conditional is false. To evaluate a subjunctive conditional, you don’t have to consider how things would go in every possible scenario, you just have to think about how
things would go in the actual world in every way except the way expressed in the first part of the conditional (i.e. what would happen if everything were like the actual world except for the fact that I was born a week later).

Nozick’s argument against the skeptic:

You know that you are reading a book.

We seem to track truths of this kind.

You know that your reading a book implies that you are not a brain in a vat.

We would also seem to track truths of this kind.

Yet you don’t know that you are not a brain in a vat.

We don’t track this truth. Why not? Because you are being deceived by the scientists into thinking that you are not a brain in a vat.

(3’) If you were a brain in a vat (if q were not true), you would believe that you were a brain in a vat (you would not believe that q).

(4’) If you were not a brain in a vat, you would not believe that you were a brain in a vat.

(3’) is the problem. You are being deceived by the scientists!

The argument, then, relies on the claim that we do not track whether or not we are brains in vats.