The Mystery of Skepticism

New Explorations

Edited by

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PART III
New Responses to Skepticism

Reasoning One's Way Out of Skepticism

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1   Introduction

Once someone has accepted the argument for external world skepticism, could any line of reasoning persuade them that knowledge of the external world is possible after all?

Many contemporary epistemologists think not. Here, for example, is Timothy Williamson (2000: 27):

> Nothing said here should convince someone who has given up ordinary beliefs that they constitute knowledge…This is the usual case with philosophical treatments of skepticism: they are better at prevention than at cure. *If a refutation of skepticism is supposed to reason one out of the hole, then skepticism is irrefutable.* (emphasis mine)

And James Pryor (2000: 517–520):

> The ambitious anti-skeptical project is to refute the skeptic on his own terms, that is, to establish that we can justifiably believe and know such things as that there is a hand, using only premises that the skeptic allows us to use. The prospects for this ambitious anti-skeptical project seem somewhat dim…Most fallibilists concede that *we can't demonstrate to the skeptic, using only premises he'll accept, that we have any perceptual knowledge….the ambitious anti-skeptical project cannot succeed.* (emphasis mine)

I aim to show that this widely held view is mistaken. I think it *is* possible to rationally persuade an external world skeptic that we have knowledge of the external world. This paper presents an argument—which appeals only to premises that an external world skeptic could accept—for the claim that rationality requires us to believe that skepticism is false.

The strategy is to argue that accepting the argument for external world skepticism ultimately commits one to more extreme forms of skepticism in a way that is self-undermining. Section 2 presents the argument for skepticism

about the external world and shows that there is a parallel argument for skepticism about the past. Section 3 argues that skepticism about the past leads to skepticism about complex reasoning. Section 4 argues that it would be self-undermining to accept skepticism about complex reasoning on the basis of the argument from skepticism about the past, since that argument is complex. In particular, one would end up believing a proposition P while believing that one should not believe P. This combination of beliefs is not rational. So, Section 5 concludes that it is not rational to accept the argument for external world skepticism, because doing so ultimately commits one to an irrational combination of beliefs. Section 6 replies to objections. Section 7 argues that suspending judgment on skepticism is also irrational. Section 8 argues that doxastic dilemmas are impossible—rationality cannot prohibit every possible doxastic attitude—and so rationality requires us to disbelieve skepticism. Section 9 argues that the resulting anti-skeptical position is not subject to instability or loop effects.[1]

In the course of giving this line of reasoning I take a stand on several issues about which there is ongoing debate, such as the role of memory in complex reasoning; which cognitive achievements are possible in a single moment; which level-bridging principles hold; and whether doxastic dilemmas are possible. Space constraints preclude entering fully into the details of all these debates here. So I cannot claim that my argument should convince every possible external world skeptic. What I do claim, however, is that in each case, the view I endorse is plausible, and—importantly—accepting external world skepticism would not give one any special reason to deny it. If so, then my argument should be rationally persuasive to a skeptic who agrees with the stances taken here on several orthogonal issues in epistemology. If so, then I will have shown, contra Williamson, Pryor, and others, that reasoning one's way out of skepticism is not *impossible*.

One consequence of this result is that we should encourage those who are inclined to pursue the project of convincing skeptics other than those addressed here. Since, as I argue here, it is not impossible to convince a skeptic, we have no reason, in advance, to expect such projects to fail; so, attempting them is worthwhile, and those who do so should be taken seriously.

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1   This may remind some readers of Wright (1991). While there are many similarities, the line of reasoning presented here is importantly different from Wright's. Moreover, Wright's project faces difficulties. Wright sets up the argument for external world skepticism in a distinctive way. There is a different, more common version of the argument to which Wright's criticisms do not apply. Wright's project is criticized in Brueckner (1992), Pritchard (2001), and Tymoczko and Vogel (1992). Jessica Wilson (2012) also argues that skepticism is self-undermining, but her strategy is quite different from mine.

Concerning my own project in this paper, it is important to note that I address only those whose skepticism is based on traditional philosophical arguments for external world skepticism. I am not aware of any other plausible arguments for external world skepticism, but nothing said here establishes that there aren't any, or that, if there were, it would be irrational to accept skepticism on their basis.

I'll make a few final big picture remarks before moving on to the substance of the argument. As noted earlier, most contemporary anti-skeptical projects do not aim to convince an external world skeptic. In this respect, my project is more ambitious than theirs. But there is another important difference—a respect in which my project is less ambitious: I don't try to diagnose the flaw in the skeptical argument. I don't isolate a particular premise as false, and explain why, despite its falsity, we found it compelling. In this respect my project is similar to G.E. Moore's (1962); he also aimed to establish that we should reject the skeptic's conclusion, but did not in the process diagnose the flaw in the skeptic's argument.

Moore held that the skeptic's conclusion can be rejected because it is incompatible with common sense. Many contemporary epistemologists have a broadly Moorean outlook, on which we can be sure, prior to substantive philosophical inquiry, that the skeptical conclusion is false. On this view, the primary task for the epistemologist who seeks to respond to skepticism is simply to identify which premise is false, and explain why, despite its falsity, we found it so compelling. From this perspective, it may seem that my project addresses one of the less important questions concerning skeptics and skepticism.

However, I have argued elsewhere (Rinard 2013) that this Moorean approach is deeply flawed. Philosophical argument is, I have claimed, capable of rationally overturning our common sense convictions. This means that we cannot simply dismiss the skeptic; we must take seriously the possibility that they may be right. Rejecting the Moorean approach lends greater urgency to projects like the one pursued in this paper: our right to hold even our most basic beliefs about the world stands or falls with their success.

2   External World Skepticism Leads to Skepticism about the Past

This section argues that if it is rational to accept external world skepticism, then it is rational to accept skepticism about the past. This is because there is an argument for the latter that is perfectly analogous to the argument for the former.[2]

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2   There are many different formulations of the argument for external world skepticism. All share the same basic strategy, originating in Descartes (1996). It's plausible that all extend

It's possible that the external world is largely as you believe it to be. Call this scenario "Normal." But there is also a possibility in which the way things appear to you is exactly the same, but these appearances are radically deceptive; you are merely a bodiless brain in a vat (BIV). The skeptic's argument begins:

(1)   One's basic evidence about the external world is restricted to propositions about the way the external world appears.

The skeptic goes on to claim that this evidence is neutral between Normal and BIV; it doesn't favor one over the other. After all, both hypotheses entail that one has the perceptual evidence that one does, e.g. that one seems to see hands, tables, chairs, etc. Since the hypotheses predict the evidence equally well, they are equally well supported by the evidence.[3,4] Thus the skeptic's second premise (followed by the third):

(2)   Propositions about the way the external world appears are evidentially neutral between Normal and BIV.
(3)   Neither Normal nor BIV is intrinsically more worthy of belief, independently of one's evidence.[5]

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to skepticism about the past, but space constraints allow detailed discussion of only one—which I take to be one of the strongest. Here I comment briefly on two others. Some common versions of the closure argument begin with the premise that for all one knows, one is a brain in a vat. But the skeptic's argument is stronger if it provides some further justification for this claim, rather than taking it as an unargued premise. The underdetermination argument focuses on the existence of a gap between sensory evidence and external world beliefs. But what is the nature of this gap? If it is merely logical—that sensory evidence doesn't *entail* external world propositions—then inductive skepticism is required for the argument to even get off the ground. Alternatively, if the gap is epistemic, then some further motivation is needed.

3 Here, evidential support is *incremental* support, not *overall* support. The overall worthiness of belief of a hypothesis depends both on (1) its worthiness of belief, independently of (prior to) one's evidence; and (2) the incremental support from one's empirical evidence.

4 Kevin McCain (2012) argues that while common sense hypotheses genuinely predict the evidence, skeptical hypotheses merely accommodate it. Here, I use "prediction" as equivalent to "probabilification." On this usage, a hypothesis predicts the evidence to the extent that it probabilifies it. Since Normal and BIV both entail the evidence, they both predict it, in this sense, equally well.

5 Features such as simplicity, coherence, etc. are sometimes thought to make for greater intrinsic worthiness of belief. With premise (3), the skeptic is denying either that Normal has greater simplicity/unification/etc. than BIV, or that differences of this kind make for greater worthiness of belief.

From (1)–(3) it follows that one neither knows, nor is justified in believing, that BIV is false. Just one more premise—the closure principle—is needed for full-on external world skepticism:[6]

(4)   If one neither knows nor is justified in believing Q, and one knows that P entails Q, then one neither knows nor is justified in believing P.

(1)–(4) yield the skeptic's conclusion:

(5)   For many external world propositions P, one neither knows nor is justified in believing P.[7]

To construct an analogous argument for skepticism about the past, first, consider a more detailed version of BIV. Suppose your creators want to deceive you about your past as well as your external surroundings. Due to budgetary constraints, they can afford to keep your brain in existence for only one minute; but, since they want to simulate a typical human experience, they implanted your brain with false apparent memories such that what it's like to have these apparent memories is exactly the same as what it's like for you in Normal to really remember what happened. Call this scenario BIV(NoPast).[8]

We can now construct an argument for skepticism about the past simply by taking our argument for external world skepticism and replacing "the external world" with "the past," and "BIV" with "BIV(NoPast)":

(1*) One's basic evidence about the past is restricted to propositions about the way the past appears (i.e. the way one seems to remember things having been).
(2*) Propositions about the way the past appears are evidentially neutral between Normal and BIV(NoPast).
(3*) Neither Normal nor BIV(NoPast) is intrinsically more worthy of belief, independently of one's evidence.

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6 Although most accept it, Dretske (1970) and Nozick (1981) are two prominent deniers of the closure principle for knowledge. Note, however, that it is far less common, and far more implausible, to deny closure for justification. The argument for skepticism about justification remains intact even if closure for knowledge is rejected.

7 Why *many*, and not *all*? Because this particular argument leaves a few beliefs untouched (e.g. *a brain exists*). But it undermines the bulk of our substantive external world beliefs (e.g. *I have hands*, *tables exist*, etc.).

8 Perhaps the most famous skeptical hypothesis concerning the past is Russell's (1921, 159), in which the world sprang into existence five minutes ago, complete with a group of people who seem to remember what we actually remember.

(4*) If one neither knows nor is justified in believing Q, and one knows that P
      entails Q, then one neither knows nor is justified in believing P.
Therefore,
(5*) For many propositions P about the past, one neither knows nor is justi-
      fied in believing P.

One who accepts the premises of the argument for external world skepticism
should also accept the premises of the argument for skepticism about the
past. It would be unacceptably arbitrary to accept (1) while rejecting (1*).
The justification given for (2) carries over to (2*). Any reason for rejecting
(3*) would constitute an equally good reason for rejecting (3). (4) and (4*) are
identical.

   This section defended the following claim:

   Claim 1:   If it is rational to accept external world skepticism, then it is
              rational to accept skepticism about the past.

3   Skepticism about the Past Leads to Skepticism about
           Complex Reasoning

The rough idea behind the argument in this section is as follows: in complex
reasoning one relies on one's memory. But if skepticism about the past is true,
one is not justified in relying on one's memory, and so not justified in believing
the conclusions of complex reasoning.[9]

   What do I mean by "complex reasoning," and "skepticism about complex
reasoning"? Reasoning counts as complex when it involves multiple steps, not
all of which can be held in one's head at once—that is, one cannot, all in one
moment, consciously grasp each step and how they all come together to yield
the conclusion. For example, suppose one begins with some premise A, and
then infers (either deductively or inductively) B from A, C from B, and so on,
finally concluding that G. Suppose that, by the time one infers G from F, one
no longer has in one's head the details of the argument by which one reasoned
from A to G; one simply seems to remember having done so. Then the reason-
ing from A to G counts as complex. Most proofs in math and logic are complex;
so are non-deductive arguments for, say, the occurrence of climate change,
or the claim that the stock market will have an average annual return of at

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9 Richard Fumerton (1995: 49) argues, in a similar vein, that skepticism about the past leads to
   skepticism about reasoning that takes place over time.

least 8% over the next century. Most interesting philosophical arguments are complex.[10]

Skepticism about complex reasoning is the view that one could not come to know, or be justified in believing, any proposition on the basis of complex reasoning. I will now sketch an argument for skepticism about complex reasoning which has skepticism about the past as a premise. (I will then examine one of the steps of this argument in more detail.) Let G be the conclusion of an arbitrary complex argument. Consider an agent who is initially not justified in believing G. They then carefully and correctly go through the argument for G. Since the argument is complex, at the moment they conclude that G, they don't have in their head the earlier steps of the argument. They merely seem to remember that they went through an argument for G. But if skepticism about the past is true, they are not justified in trusting their apparent memory, because they are not justified in believing any proposition about the past. For all they knows, they haven't even been in existence long enough to have gone through an argument for G. So, by the time they conclude that G, they are not justified in believing it. (Further discussion of this last step appears in the paragraph after the next one.)

That is, if skepticism about the past is true, then despite having gone through a complex argument for G, the agent is not justified in believing it. So it follows from skepticism about the past that one cannot come to know, or be justified in believing, a proposition by going through a complex argument for it.

I'll now examine in more detail the last step of the argument just sketched. That step was:

> (*) If an agent does not have in their head the argument for G, is not justified in trusting their apparent memory that they went through an argument for G, and has no independent reason for believing G, then they are not justified in believing G, even if they did in fact go through a good argument for G.

First, a preliminary remark. While I think (*) is highly plausible, it is worth noting that my project does not actually require (*) to be *true*. All it requires is that some external world skeptics would accept it. This is because, as noted in the introduction, my overall aim is to show how it is possible for an external world skeptic to reason their way out of skepticism. So it is not a problem for my project if some contemporary epistemologists reject (*), as long as some

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10   Pasnau (2014) recounts a lively debate, going back to the Middle Ages and beyond, concerning which arguments can be grasped, in their entirety, all at once. (For example, Burge (1993) denies that even single-step inferences can be grasped all at once.) Poston (2016) contains an extensive discussion of how much is contained in the "fleeting present."

external world skeptics would accept it. (*) is endorsed by many contemporary epistemologists (myself included), and an external world skeptic has no special reason to reject it.

That said, it will nonetheless be interesting to consider some views which are, and some which are not, compatible with (*). One view that is incompatible with (*) is the view that anyone who competently deduces some proposition P from known premises thereby comes to know P. This view has some implausible consequences, however. Suppose that Candace carefully and correctly goes through a complex argument for P. When she finally infers P, she no longer has in her head the steps of this argument; she merely seems to remember having gone through some argument or other for P (and she has no independent reason to believe P). Then, Candace learns that she is under the influence of a drug that makes one's memory unreliable, in the following sense: people who have taken this drug often have false apparent memories. Much of what they seem to remember never, in fact, happened. It is plausible that upon learning this, Candace should suspend judgment on whether she did, in fact, go through an argument for P, and, consequently, suspend judgment on whether P is true. After all, she does not have in her head any argument for P, and she has no independent reason to believe P. However, according to the view just stated, since she did *in fact* competently deduce P from known premises, she is justified in believing P. This, I think, is the wrong result.

A defender of (*) can see skepticism about the past as playing a role analogous to the role played, in the example just given, by Candace's knowledge of having taken the drug. What the knowledge of the drug does, first and foremost, is make it unreasonable for Candace to trust her apparent memories. It is *this* that then makes it unreasonable for her to believe propositions that she has in fact derived via complex reasoning. Skepticism about the past has the same effect. First and foremost, it makes it unreasonable for the agent to trust their apparent memories. Just as in the drug case, this means that it is unreasonable for the agent to believe the deliverances of complex reasoning. Skepticism about the past, and knowledge of having taken a memory-distorting drug, both have this result, because both make the agent unjustified in trusting their apparent memories.

Some philosophers have suggested to me, in conversation, that (*) might also be rejected by a proponent of the view that, although positive reason for doubting one's memory can undermine justification in the results of complex reasoning, in the absence of such defeaters, one has a default entitlement to trust one's memory (and therefore complex reasoning). This view is defended by (among others) Tyler Burge in a dispute with Roderick Chisholm (Burge (1993) and Chisholm (1977)). Burge and Chisholm disagree about whether propositions about the past are part of one's justification for the conclusion of a complex argument.

Chisholm affirms this; Burge denies it. Clearly, Chisholm would endorse (*). Burge's case is not initially so obvious, but I will argue that he would as well.

Although Burge denies that propositions about the past are part of one's justification for G, he does allow that there is some sense in which one relies on one's memory in complex reasoning. As noted above, he thinks that if one has positive reason for doubting one's memory, then one is not justified in trusting complex reasoning. The antecedent of (*) states that the agent is not justified in believing what she seems to remember. On Burge's view, if this is true, then it must be that she has positive reason for doubting her memory. Burge agrees that, *given this*, the consequent of (*)—that trusting complex reasoning is not justified—follows. So Burge would agree with (*).

What Burge would reject is the idea that philosophical arguments for skepticism about the past constitute good positive reason for doubting one's memory. But it is not my aim to defend that claim. The aim of this section is merely to establish that *if* skepticism about the past is true, then so is skepticism about complex reasoning; and, as I have argued, Burge should endorse that conditional claim.

One view that *is* incompatible with (*) is the view that coming to believe P via a reliable process is always sufficient for justification in P, even if one has good reason to doubt that one's process was reliable. But this view is in direct conflict with both skepticism about the external world and skepticism about the past, so such skeptics would not endorse that view. (According to the reliabilist view, if one's senses and memory are in fact reliable, one is justified in trusting them, whereas according to the skeptic, no one is ever justified in trusting one's senses or memory.)

To summarize, this section has argued that the following claim should be accepted by those external world skeptics who accept (*):

> Claim 11:   If it's rational to accept skepticism about the past, then it's rational to accept the argument from skepticism about the past to skepticism about complex reasoning.

4   It is Not Rational to Accept Skepticism about Complex Reasoning

This section argues that it is not rational to accept the argument, described in Section 3, from skepticism about the past to skepticism about complex reasoning.

First, notice that this argument is itself complex. I cannot consciously grasp, all at once, why each step of the argument is plausible and how all the steps come together to support the conclusion (see Section 6 for a related objection and reply). But the conclusion of this argument is that it is not rational to accept

complex arguments. So there is a sense in which the argument is self-undermining. As I will argue in this section, the self-undermining character of this argument manifests itself in the fact that if one accepts it, one ends up believing a proposition P while at the same time believing that it is not rational to believe P. This is an irrational combination of beliefs. So accepting the argument is not rational, since doing so results in an irrational combination of beliefs.

To see why, suppose one were to accept the argument from skepticism about the past to complex reasoning skepticism. Let P be the conclusion of this argument (i.e. the thesis of skepticism about complex reasoning). At the moment one accepts P, one knows one is not accepting it on the basis of a simple argument. After all, if one were accepting it on the basis of a simple argument, one would have all of the steps of that argument in one's head at the moment one accepts P. However, one can tell at the moment of acceptance that one does not have in one's head all the steps of an argument for P.

Since one knows one is not accepting P on the basis of a simple argument, one knows that one of the two remaining possibilities obtains: either one is accepting P on the basis of a complex argument, or one's acceptance of P is not based on any argument at all. Since one is a skeptic about complex reasoning, one believes that if the first possibility obtains, one's belief in P is not rational. Consider now the second possibility. Recall that P is the proposition that skepticism about complex reasoning is true. Perhaps there are some propositions one could rationally believe without basing one's belief on an argument ("1 = 1," perhaps), but if there are, skepticism about complex reasoning is not among them. It is a highly surprising claim, far from obvious. So one also believes that if the second possibility obtains, one's belief in P is not rational. So, one believes that one's belief in P is not rational, no matter which of these two possibilities obtains.

That is, at the moment one accepts the conclusion of the argument for skepticism about complex reasoning, one believes P and one also believes that one's belief in P is not rational. But this is not a rational combination of beliefs. So it is not rational to accept the argument from skepticism about the past to skepticism about complex reasoning, because doing so results in an irrational combination of beliefs.

The foregoing relied on the following principle:

> *Anti-Denouncement*:   It is not rational to believe a proposition P while also believing that it is not rational for one to believe P.

The idea is that it is not rational to denounce one's own belief, in the sense of believing it to be irrational. This principle is highly plausible. However, it is not

universally accepted, and there is debate about whether it holds in all cases.[11] It is beyond the scope of this paper to enter into this debate. I will simply describe one case that helps bring out the plausibility of this principle, and note that the aim of this paper will be achieved if the overall argument given here would be convincing to those skeptics who do accept Anti-Denouncement.

Imagine someone—let's call him Randall—who's wondering whether it would be a good idea for him to invest his retirement savings in the stock market. He's sure of the following conditional claim: if the market will have an average annual return of at least 8% over the next few decades, then he ought to invest his savings in the market. Naturally, he then turns to the question of whether the antecedent of this conditional is true.

Suppose that, upon careful consideration of the evidence available to him, Randall concludes that, given his evidence, he definitely should not believe that the market will return at least 8%. This belief, he is sure, would not be rational, given his evidence. But suppose further that, despite this, he does believe that the market will return at least 8%, and decides on that basis to invest his savings entirely in the market. I think that in this case, Randall should be regarded as irrational. A rational person would not believe that the market will return at least 8% while also believing at the same time that, given his evidence, he should believe no such thing.

This judgment about this case suggests that Anti-Denouncement is true. If Anti-Denouncement were false, it's hard to see what could be wrong with Randall's beliefs. But it seems clear that they are not the beliefs of a rational person.

This section defended the following claim:

> Claim III: It is not rational to accept the argument from skepticism about the past to complex reasoning skepticism.

5   It is Not Rational to Accept External World Skepticism

To summarize, this section brings together the three claims defended in Sections 2–4. They entail that it is not rational to accept external world skepticism.

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11   Weatherson (unpublished manuscript), Williamson (2011), and Lasonen-Aarnio (2014) argue against related claims. Principles along these lines are defended in Feldman (2005), Bergmann (2005), Horowitz (2014), and Greco (2014), and discussed in Christensen (2010), Elga (2013), and Titelbaum (2015).

Claim I: If it's rational to accept external world skepticism, then it's rational to accept skepticism about the past.

Claim II: If it's rational to accept skepticism about the past, then it's rational to accept the argument from skepticism about the past to skepticism about complex reasoning.

Subconclusion: If it's rational to accept external world skepticism, then it's rational to accept the argument from skepticism about the past to skepticism about complex reasoning.

Claim III: It is not rational to accept the argument from skepticism about the past to skepticism about complex reasoning.

Conclusion: It is not rational to accept external world skepticism.

6   Objections and Replies

Objection 1:

The argument in Section 4 for the claim that it is not rational to accept the argument from skepticism about the past to skepticism about complex reasoning rests on the assumption that this argument is complex. But it's not clear that it is.

Reply:

I think it is plausible that this argument is complex; I, at least, am not able to consciously appreciate, all at once, each individual step of the argument, why it is plausible, and how exactly all the steps combine to support the conclusion. However, my argument would go through even if this argument were simple, since this argument is in fact only a small part of the overall argument for skepticism about complex reasoning. The overall argument includes the argument for skepticism about the past, and the arguments for the premises of that argument (from the parallel with external world skepticism).

That is, the entire argument for skepticism about complex reasoning includes the argument for external world skepticism, the argument linking external world skepticism to skepticism about the past, the argument for skepticism about the past, and the argument from skepticism about the past to skepticism about complex reasoning. This argument is surely complex.[12]

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12   As noted above, Pasnau (2014) presents a history of an extended debate in philosophy concerning which arguments can be grasped in their entirety at once. Some, such as Burge (1993), hold that we are unable to do this even for very short arguments.

Objection II:

It may be plausible that, for actual humans, the argument for skepticism about complex reasoning is complex, since we are unable to hold this entire argument in our heads at once. However, whether an argument is complex or simple is agent-relative; it is (metaphysically) possible for there to be an agent, who although in all other respects is just like us, is able to hold incredibly long arguments in their head at once. In particular, they can hold in their head the entire argument for skepticism about complex reasoning. For this agent, this argument is simple, and so it would not be self-undermining for them to accept it—there is nothing self-undermining about accepting a simple argument for skepticism about complex reasoning. Since this agent is in all other respects like us, they will find each premise of the argument individually plausible, and so, since the argument is simple for them, they will accept it, and come to believe skepticism about the external world, the past, and complex reasoning. In short: if there were an agent with certain enhanced cognitive abilities, they would be a skeptic.

The reasoning just given (continues the objector) should be accepted by anyone who accepts the argument in Sections 2–5. Such a person would then be in the following peculiar situation: because they accept the argument in Sections 2–5, they think it would not be rational for them to believe skepticism, and so they don't believe it. But, at the same time, they know that if there were an agent just like them, except with certain enhanced cognitive abilities, that agent *would* believe skepticism. This combination of beliefs is not rational, according to the following principle:

> *Deference*:   If one (rationally) believes that a cognitively enhanced version of oneself would believe P, then rationality requires one to believe P.

Deference is very plausible. For example, suppose you're uncertain about whether Goldbach's conjecture can be proved. You then learn that if there were a version of yourself with enhanced cognitive abilities—specifically, enhanced mathematical abilities—that enhanced agent would believe that there is a proof of Goldbach's conjecture. Plausibly, upon learning this information, you are rationally required to believe there is such a proof. This suggests that Deference is true. If so, then it would not be rational to accept the argument given in Sections 2–5.

Reply:

I agree with the objector that Deference is plausible, and I agree that the Goldbach's Conjecture case shows that something in the vicinity of this

principle must be true. Nevertheless, we have independent reason to think that, as stated, Deference is false. I will argue that the properly revised version of Deference does not have the consequence that anyone who accepts the argument in Sections 2–5 has an irrational combination of beliefs.

First, though, note that the objector is not obviously correct in assuming that an enhanced agent would believe skepticism. It might be that if one were enhanced in this way, one would no longer believe the skeptic's premises. Also, even supposing that the enhanced agent would believe skepticism, the non-skeptic may have good reasons for thinking that an ideally rational agent would not.[13] (Since the enhanced agent is just like us in every respect other than this particular enhancement, they are not ideally rational.) Nevertheless, for the remainder of my reply I will assume the objector is right that the enhanced agent would accept skepticism, since I think the objection fails in any case, because the key principle on which it relies does not hold in the case of the non-skeptic.

The following consideration shows that Deference, as stated, is false. As the objector noted, we have good reason to doubt that an enhanced agent actually exists. However, according to Deference, we are rationally required to believe that such an agent does exist. This is because we know that if there were an enhanced agent, they would know that they are enhanced in a certain way, and so they would believe that an enhanced agent (namely, themselves) exists. According to Deference, one should believe whatever one knows an enhanced agent would believe, so according to Deference, one should believe that an enhanced agent actually exists. Clearly this is the wrong result, and so Deference, as stated, is false.[14,15]

Nevertheless, the Goldbach's conjecture case shows that some principle in the vicinity of Deference must be true. The crucial question, then, is this: will the correct version of Deference (whatever it is) still entail that it would not be rational to decline skepticism on the basis of the argument in Sections 2–5? Or is this just another example in which Deference, as originally formulated, gets the wrong result?

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13   Assuming the non-skeptic believes that skepticism is false (rather than merely failing to believe it's true), they must believe that one of the skeptic's premises is false. It might seem plausible that an ideally rational agent would believe every true necessary proposition. If so, then the non-skeptic must think that an ideally rational agent would disbelieve whichever premise of the skeptical argument is in fact false, and so would not be a skeptic.

14   Similar arguments appear in Plantinga (1982).

15   One might respond by modifying Deference as follows: One should believe whatever an enhanced agent would advise one to believe. Presumably an enhanced agent would not advise you to believe that an enhanced agent exists. The question is then whether they would advise you to believe skepticism. The rest of the reply to this objection can be seen as a reason for thinking they would not.

I think we have independent reason for thinking that the second possibility obtains. This is because there is another counterexample to Deference, and the most natural explanation for why Deference fails in this case has the consequence that Deference fails in the case of the non-skeptic as well.

Suppose one learns that, if there were an enhanced version of oneself, that enhanced agent would believe that Deference is false. In particular, the enhanced agent would believe the following: the fact that an enhanced version of oneself believes P is never a good reason for believing P. According to Deference, upon learning this, one should come to believe that Deference is false. But that is clearly not the rational response to the situation. To do this would be self-undermining. It would not be rational to believe, on the basis of Deference, that Deference is false. To do so would be to believe a proposition P (that one should never adopt a belief on the basis of Deference) while believing that one should not believe P (because the basis for one's belief in P is that Deference says one ought to believe it).

This suggests that Deference fails in cases in which, if one were to believe what one believes the enhanced agent would believe, one's position would be self-undermining (in the sense that one would believe P while believing that one should not believe P).

But this is true of the person who accepts my argument. Suppose this non-skeptic were to adopt the belief, on the basis of Deference, that skepticism is true. That is, suppose they were to reason as follows: an enhanced agent would believe skepticism. One should believe whatever one believes an enhanced agent would believe. So I should believe skepticism.

If they accept skepticism on the basis of this argument, their position is self-undermining,[16] because the above argument for skepticism about complex reasoning is complex. (This is because it relies on the assumption that an enhanced agent would believe skepticism, and the argument for this is complex.)

I take this to show that Deference gives the wrong result in the case of the agent who, on the basis of my argument, gives up the belief that skepticism is true. This is because we have independent reason to believe that Deference

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16   The argument for this can be spelled out in more detail as follows. They believe a proposition, P (skepticism about complex reasoning). They know that they do not believe P on the basis of a simple argument (the argument in the above paragraph is not simple, because it relies on the claim that an enhanced agent would believe skepticism; the argument for this is complex.). They also know that P is not the kind of proposition that could be rationally believed on the basis of no argument. The only remaining possibility is that they believe P on the basis of a complex argument (this is in fact the case); but since they accept skepticism about complex reasoning, they believe that in this case they should not believe P. So they believe P while believing that they should not believe P.

fails in cases in which following it would lead one into a self-undermining position, and this is true in the case of the non-skeptic.

More can be said to explain why Deference fails in such cases. I think the plausibility of principles like Deference stems from a picture we have about the role of idealized agents in epistemology. According to this picture, the rationality of one's position increases as one's position becomes more similar, overall, to the position of an idealized agent. One important respect of similarity concerns the contents of one's beliefs. Other things equal, adopting beliefs that are shared by an idealized agent makes one's position more rational. That is why this picture makes Deference seem plausible.

But this very same picture also explains why Deference fails in certain cases. Similarity in the contents of one's beliefs is not the only kind of similarity that counts.[17] Moreover, sometimes, for limited agents, becoming more similar in the content of one's beliefs involves becoming less similar in another important respect. Deference fails to take this into account; it focuses on only one respect of similarity.

The position of the limited agent, the non-skeptic, differs from the position of the enhanced agent in that the former does not believe skepticism, but the latter does. However, the positions of the limited agent and the enhanced agent are similar in the following important respect: both positions are not self-undermining. If the limited agent were to adopt the enhanced agent's belief, their position would become less similar in this important respect, because their position would now be self-undermining. Deference fails in this case because matching beliefs would make the limited agent overall less similar to the enhanced agent, because it would make the limited agent's position self-undermining, unlike the position of the enhanced agent.

So we see that the motivating idea behind Deference also helps explain why Deference fails in certain cases, like the case of the non-skeptic. The motivating idea is that one's position should be as similar as possible to the enhanced agent's position. The problem is that Deference focuses on only one respect of similarity. Usually, this doesn't matter, because becoming more similar in this respect doesn't usually make one less similar in other respects. But occasionally, as in the case of the non-skeptic, it does. In such cases, Deference fails.

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17   For example, consider a complex mathematical theorem M which one has no reason for
      believing. One shouldn't believe M, even though an enhanced agent would (one doesn't
      know that an enhanced agent would believe it). This example makes the general point
      that the rationality of one's position depends on more than just the overall similarity of
      the contents of one's beliefs to the contents of the beliefs of an enhanced agent.

7   It is Not Rational to Suspend Judgment on External World Skepticism

So far, I have presented an argument, which could persuade an external world skeptic, for the claim that believing external world skepticism is not rational. The former skeptic may now come to believe that skepticism is false. After all, consider their intellectual history. Before encountering the skeptical argument, they had a typical collection of ordinary beliefs, including the belief that they knew many things about the world. Then, upon hearing the skeptical argument, they were convinced by it, and gave up the belief that they had external world knowledge. Once they accept the argument given here, they may simply revert back to the position they were in before encountering the skeptical argument. They now see that accepting this argument was a mistake; it was not rational for them to do so. A natural response would be to re-adopt the position they would have maintained, had they not made that particular mistake.

However, some think that, rather than reverting to their original belief that they know many things about the world, the former skeptic should now suspend judgment on skepticism. They think the former skeptic should reason as follows: I've seen that it's not rational to accept the argument for external world skepticism, because doing so commits one to an irrational combination of beliefs. However, this doesn't change the fact that the premises of the skeptical argument are highly compelling. They are so compelling that it couldn't possibly be rational to believe that one of them is false, so it couldn't be rational to believe that external world skepticism is false. The only remaining option is to suspend judgment on external world skepticism, so that is what rationality requires.

According to this line of thought, the skeptic should suspend judgment on skepticism while believing, on the basis of the argument just given, that it's rational to do so. I'll call someone in this position a *confident suspender*. (Later we'll encounter an *unconfident* suspender, who suspends judgment on skepticism while suspending judgment on whether it's rational to do so.)

The position of the confident suspender may sound very reasonable. However, I will argue that it is not rational. It has a defect very similar to the one that undermined the position of the original external world skeptic. First, note that suspending judgment on external world skepticism commits one to suspending judgment on other kinds of skepticism as well. Earlier I argued that *accepting* external world skepticism commits one to also *accepting* skepticism about the past and thereby skepticism about complex reasoning. Similarly, *suspending judgment on* skepticism about the external world commits one to *suspending judgment on* skepticism about the past and thereby skepticism about complex reasoning. Let's assume the confident suspender does so.

Now, however, we can begin to see where the problem lies. The confident suspender believes a proposition P—the proposition that rationality requires them to suspend judgment on external world skepticism—on the basis of the argument sketched a few paragraphs back. This argument is complex. (It relies on the claim that it's not rational to believe external world skepticism, and the argument for this (in Sections 2–5) is complex.) So the confident suspender believes P on the basis of a complex argument, while suspending judgment on skepticism about complex reasoning. That is, they believe P while suspending judgment on whether believing P is rational. In doing so, they violate a plausible principle I call Belief Endorsement, which says, roughly, that rational agents *endorse* their own beliefs, in the sense of believing them to be rational. More precisely:

> *Belief Endorsement*:   Rationality prohibits combinations of attitudes of the following kind: One believes P, but one takes some doxastic attitude, *other than belief*, toward the proposition that belief in P is rational.[18]

Note that Belief Endorsement does *not* say that, whatever beliefs one initially happens to have, one must believe that *they* are rational: it may be that one has some irrational beliefs, in which case Belief Endorsement allows that rationality may require one to give up those irrational beliefs, rather than adopt the (in these cases mistaken) belief that they are rational.

Belief Endorsement is highly plausible; it entails Anti-Denouncement (from Section 4) and can be seen as a natural generalization of it. But, as noted above, the confident suspender has a combination of attitudes that violate Belief Endorsement. The confident suspender believes P—that rationality requires suspension of judgment on external world skepticism—while suspending judgment on whether it is rational to have that belief.

What about the position of the unconfident suspender? Both the confident and unconfident suspender suspend judgment on external world skepticism, and they both also suspend judgment on skepticism about the past and skepticism about complex reasoning. The confident suspender got into trouble by combining these attitudes with the belief that rationality requires suspending judgment on external world skepticism. The unconfident suspender seeks to avoid this trouble by not believing this proposition. Instead, they suspend judgment on it.

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18   Here I am working within a framework in which there are three doxastic attitudes: belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgment.

Unfortunately the unconfident suspender thereby gets into a closely related kind of trouble. They suspend judgment on external world skepticism while suspending judgment on whether they ought to suspend judgment on external world skepticism, thereby violating the following principle:

Endorsement: Rationality prohibits combinations of attitudes of the following kind: One takes doxastic attitude D toward P, but one takes some doxastic attitude, *other than belief*, toward the proposition that taking D to P is rational.

Endorsement is the generalization of Belief Endorsement to doxastic attitudes other than belief. In epistemology, as elsewhere, we should aim for simplicity and elegance in our theorizing. The simplest theory will treat all doxastic attitudes alike: if Endorsement is true for belief, it should be true for other doxastic attitudes as well. If so, then the unconfident suspender fares no better than the confident suspender.

There is another unfortunate feature of the unconfident suspender's position. Recall, first, that this position was adopted on the basis of complex considerations of the sort described above. Their position of radical uncertainty was not adopted out of the blue, for no reason whatsoever; rather, it was prompted by seeing how skepticism is self-undermining. But, since they suspend judgment on propositions about the past, and because these considerations are complex, they know nothing of them now. They are unsure of many things, but they have no idea why. Having adopted this position, they can no longer see any reason for maintaining it. It is hard to see how such a position could be rational.

Suppose, for example, that the unconfident suspender happens to catch sight of their hands. They have a vivid experience as of a hand, and are inclined to believe it. Since their doxastic position is so impoverished, they possess no reason why they should not believe it.

Now, if a skeptic had this experience, they would have at the ready a compelling argument for why it is that one shouldn't believe that one has a hand, namely their original argument for skepticism. And the confident suspender would have at the ready an argument for why one should suspend judgment on the proposition that one has a hand. But the unconfident suspender, since they believe so little, has no doxastic resources with which to resist the inclination to believe that they have a hand.

This section has argued that suspending judgment on external world skepticism is not rational. The confident suspender is irrational because they violate

Belief Endorsement. The unconfident suspender violates a generalization of Belief Endorsement, and their position has other unfortunate features.[19]

8   Rationality Requires Disbelieving Skepticism

I have now argued that *believing* skepticism is not rational (Sections 2–5) and that *suspending judgment* on skepticism is not rational (the previous section). What rationality requires, I claim, is that we believe that skepticism is false.

This claim would be mistaken if the skeptical problem were an instance of a doxastic dilemma. A doxastic dilemma is a situation in which rationality prohibits believing P, rationality prohibits disbelieving P, and rationality prohibits suspending judgment on P. That is, a doxastic dilemma is a situation in which there is no doxastic attitude one could rationally take towards P. My view is that doxastic dilemmas are impossible. If so, then skepticism can't be an instance of one.

It is central to our concept of rationality that rationality constitutes an ideal to which one could coherently aspire, and by which one could be guided. But if doxastic dilemmas were possible, rationality could not play this role in those cases. We cannot be guided by the voice of rationality if rationality tells us to neither believe, nor disbelieve, nor suspend judgment on P. We could not coherently aspire to conform to the requirements of rationality if there were doxastic dilemmas. Since I regard its ability to play this guidance-giving role as constitutive of rationality, I conclude that there are no doxastic dilemmas.

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19   It has been suggested to me that Endorsement should be rejected because there could be a rational agent who is so confused and uncertain that they suspend judgment on P and also suspend judgment on whether it's rational to suspend on P. However, in my view, such an agent would not be rational. Consider the sorts of circumstances that could make it rational to suspend judgment on P. Perhaps there are conflicting considerations, some of which favor P, and some of which favor not-P. Or perhaps the agent hasn't yet worked out whether their evidence on balance favors P over not-P. Whatever circumstances make it rational to suspend judgment on P, presumably a rational agent would be able to recognize when they are in these circumstances, and recognize that such circumstances call for suspending judgment on P. Of course, this need not prevent them from also recognizing (when it's true) that it may not be rational for other people to suspend judgment on P, or that it may not be rational for them to suspend judgment on P in the future (for example, they may expect that further deliberation will result in their coming to rationally believe or disbelieve P). But whenever it is true that, in their present circumstance, rationality requires them to suspend judgment on P, a rational agent will recognize this, and so will not also suspend judgment on whether they ought to suspend on P.

One might object that rationality could play its guidance-giving role even if there were a doxastic dilemma. What rationality would tell us to do, in such a case, is to take no doxastic attitude whatsoever toward the proposition in question.

I will now argue that rationality cannot require that one take no attitude toward some proposition. In order to do so, I'll distinguish various ways it could be the case that one takes no attitude toward some proposition P. One way is to be cognitively deficient in a way that renders one unable to understand P. One might lack one of the concepts contained in P, for example. But, I claim, such cognitive deficiency could not be a requirement of *rationality*, which represents an *ideal* way that an agent might be.

A second way to take no attitude toward P is to be capable of understanding P, but to have never, in fact, ever consciously entertained the question whether P. Again, it could not be a requirement of rationality that one inhabit so unreflective a state. Having and pursuing curiosity, and engaging in inquiry and reflection, are intellectual virtues, and, as such, could not be prohibited by rationality.

At this point, some will think we have exhausted all possible ways of taking no attitude toward a proposition. Some hold that, once an agent considers the question whether P, if she neither believes P nor disbelieves P, then she suspends judgment on P. If so, then my argument for the claim that rationality cannot require taking no attitude is complete.

However, some may have a more demanding conception of what it is to suspend judgment on a proposition.[20] Some may hold that one does not count as suspending judgment on P unless one has concluded deliberation with a settled neutrality toward P. On this view, one can take no attitude toward P while one is in the process of deliberating on whether P; or, it may be that one did deliberate on whether P in the past, but one's deliberation was cut short before coming to a proper conclusion, for example due to distraction, frustration, boredom, etc. Might rationality require that one inhabit a state of this kind?

I do not think that rationality could require that one start deliberating on whether P, but then stop due to some cause such as frustration, boredom, distraction, etc. Some of these are intellectual vices. For example, stopping deliberation out of frustration or boredom is an intellectual vice, and not the sort of thing that could be required by rationality. Stopping deliberation due to distraction by some more urgent project need not be a vice; but it does not

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20   See Friedman (2013) for a discussion of different conceptions of suspended judgment.

seem to be the sort of thing that rationality could require. Surely there could be a perfectly rational agent with all the time in the word to sit and ponder.

The only remaining possibility, compatible with one's failing to take a doxastic attitude toward P, is that one deliberate on whether P *forever* (or at least until one ceases to exist). But, I claim, this could not be a requirement of rationality either. In this case my argument relies on the following principle: if rationality requires one to φ, then it must be possible for one to φ while rationally believing that rationality requires φ-ing. I claim that it is not possible for a rational agent to deliberate on P while believing that what rationality requires is that one deliberate on P forever.

The reason has to do with the nature of deliberation. Deliberation is essentially a goal-directed activity. One deliberates on whether P with the aim of concluding this deliberation with some sort of stable attitude toward P (be it belief, disbelief, or suspension of judgment). One is trying to figure out what attitude to take toward P. But one can't rationally engage in a goal-directed activity while believing that achieving that goal is rationally forbidden. One can't rationally deliberate on P while believing that concluding this deliberation is rationally forbidden. I conclude that rationality cannot require that one deliberate on some proposition forever.

The upshot is that rationality cannot require that one take no doxastic attitude at all towards P, and so, there can be no doxastic dilemmas, compatible with rationality's uniformly playing its guidance-giving role.

In this section I have made a prima facie case for the claim that there are no doxastic dilemmas. This entails that skepticism is not an instance of a doxastic dilemma, which is a necessary condition for it to be the case that, as I claim, rationality requires disbelieving skepticism. I do not claim that my prima facie case against the possibility of doxastic dilemmas should convince everyone. There is much more that could be said on this point, but it is beyond the scope of this paper to enter further into the details of that debate. As before, the aims of this paper will be satisfied if my argument can convince those skeptics who agree that doxastic dilemmas are impossible.

9   Is the Anti-Skeptical Position Unstable?

Suppose, then, that on the basis of the arguments given here, the former skeptic comes around to endorsing their original view that they know many things about the external world. One might worry that their newfound anti-skepticism is vulnerable to instability. Since the premises of the original skeptical argument remain compelling, will they not be inclined to adopt them again,

to once again become a skeptic, again notice the problem, again reject skepticism….and again accept the skeptical premises, repeating the cycle forever?[21]

This outcome is not inevitable. Having gone through the loop once, the former skeptic may rationally maintain their non-skeptical position, even when presented with the skeptical arguments they once endorsed.

This is because there is an important difference between a *seasoned* non-skeptic—a former skeptic who once endorsed the argument for external world skepticism, discovered the irrational position to which it lead, and consequently re-adopted the anti-skeptical stance—and a *naïve* non-skeptic, who has never encountered skeptical arguments. The naïve non-skeptic may enter innocently into external world skepticism before seeing the incoherence that awaits. But the seasoned non-skeptic has been down that road before. When presented with the argument for external world skepticism, they see not just the prima facie plausibility of its premises, but also the irrational position to which those premises lead. With this outcome vividly before them, they can, even while acknowledging the plausibility of the premises, nonetheless rationally decline to accept them.

10   Conclusion

I have argued, using only premises that an external world skeptic could accept, that rationality requires us to believe that external world skepticism is false. At several points I have taken a stand on issues that remain controversial, such as the role of memory in complex reasoning; which arguments can be grasped, in their entirety, all at once, by ordinary humans; the status of various level-bridging principles (Anti-Denouncement, Belief Endorsement, Endorsement); and the possibility of doxastic dilemmas. There is more to be said on these and other points. In each case, however, a prima facie compelling case can be made; and an external world skeptic would not be committed to the opposing view just in virtue of their skepticism. Thus, the line of reasoning presented here could rationally persuade an external world skeptic, who shares the views endorsed here on these orthogonal issues, to give up their skepticism.

In contrast, many contemporary epistemologists regard the skeptic as a hopeless case, and the attempt to reason with the skeptic as a lost cause. The skeptic is portrayed as someone so far gone that there's no point in trying to save them now. The best we can do is try to prevent others, who are not yet

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21   Discussions of loop effects in different, but related, contexts appear in Hume (1888: 187) and Plantinga (1993, 1994).

skeptics, from succumbing to the same fate. Thus Williamson's observation that most responses to skepticism are "better at prevention than cure"[22] and Byrne's remark that "the sceptic doesn't need an argument; she needs treatment."[23]

The upshot of this paper is that this view of the situation is misguided. We need not regard the skeptic as someone who can't be reasoned with. Each premise of the argument given here could be accepted by an external world skeptic. Once a skeptic accepts the conclusion of this argument—that rationality requires the belief that skepticism is false—they should then adopt that belief. It *is* possible to reason one's way out of skepticism.[24]

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22 Williamson (2000, 27).
23 Byrne (2004, 301).
24 Many thanks to Selim Berker, Alex Byrne, Nick DiBella, Adam Elga, Andrew Graham, David Gray, Stephen Maitzen, Julia Markovits, Kevin McCain, Ram Neta, Robert Pasnau, Ted Poston, Agustin Rayo, Alison Simmons, Amia Srinivasan, Robert Stalnaker, Jonathan Vogel, Timothy Williamson, Alex Worsnip, Stephen Yablo, and audiences at Oxford University, the University of Missouri – Columbia, and the Ranch Metaphysics Conference. Special thanks to Miriam Schoenfeld and Roger White for extensive comments on multiple drafts.

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